

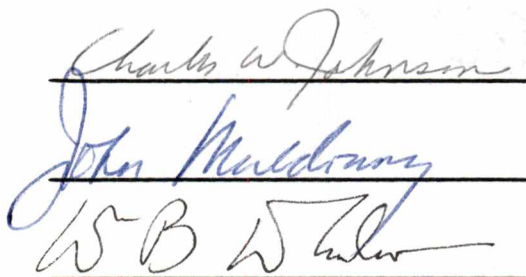
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ROBERT LEWIS DABNEY AND THE NEW SOUTH CRITIQUE

A Thesis

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Degree

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William Todd Groce

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ABSTRACT

During the decades following the Civil War, Southern religious leaders assisted planters in recapturing their hegemonic social and economic status. Believing that the antebellum world was consistent with true Christianity and that the plantation regime provided a bulwark against decadence and moral decay, these clergymen fashioned the New South critique, which sought to justify continued planter domination of Southern society. Chief among the defenders of the old order was Virginian and Presbyterian divine Robert Lewis Dabney, who argued for a society based on moral rectitude, natural social and racial hierarchies, plantation economy, and religious reverence for the Confederate past. This Old South creed for the New South era provided the region's elites with an ideology potent enough to neutralize the threat posed by nascent industrialists, thereby ensuring the hegemony of agricultural interests in the South until the mid-twentieth century.

PREFACE

This is a study of how ideas interact with the material realm of human activity. The late nineteenth century was a turbulent period in Southern society during which the region's planter class sought, and eventually recaptured, the hegemonic status which nascent industrialists had challenged. In the process of reasserting their domination, the old planter aristocracy found it necessary to justify the antebellum world which they were attempting to recreate. They were not alone in this difficult task, for they were assisted by the polemical talents of the region's religious leaders. As the self-appointed defenders of spiritual and moral purity, Southern clergymen waged the ideological battle to preserve planter hegemony by fashioning an apology for these elites, whose cultural standards they believed were consistent with their own conception of Christianity.

Foremost among the intellectual defenders of the ancien regime was Virginian and Presbyterian divine Robert Lewis Dabney. While it is impossible to ignore Dabney's religious life in any discussion of the man and his ideas, I have dealt very little with his theology, mainly concentrating on his secular ideology. Traditionally, it is within the secular realm that Dabney has been branded as an extreme conservative, whose antiquated thought was sadly out of step with the unrelenting advance of the "brave New South." Yet, recent reinterpretation of postbellum Southern society has rendered this thesis indefensible. In my study, I have redefined Dabney's role

in the making of the "new" South, and have accorded him much more significance than have previous historians. Methodologically, I have attempted to link the context of his ideology with the historical circumstances in which it was formulated, rather than taking a purely philosophical approach. By historicizing the text of Dabney's diverse writings--that is, by re-examining them in light of new interpretations of long-term social, political and economic forces and trends--it is possible to arrive at a more accurate understanding of Dabney's part in fashioning the post-war world. If the conclusion drawn here is correct--that Dabney was indeed a defender of Southern Bourbonism--then perhaps he and his ideas can be rescued from the oblivion to which they have been relegated by those who perceive the history of the South as more characterized by change than by continuity.

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CHAPTER I

MODERNIZATION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR HEGEMONY

During the closing decades of the nineteenth century, there emerged within the Southern intellectual community an anti-bourgeois ideology characterized by a deep sense of gloom and by fear of decadence and cultural decay. Fostered by military defeat and by the threat of an industrialized society, this ideology embraced a pessimistic evaluation of the present and a sense of nostalgia for an agrarian society of the past. It manifested itself in the form of an elaborate critique of materialism and mass culture which focused upon the so-called "New South Creed," a dogma emphasizing industrialization and material wealth. Perceived as a challenge to the antebellum social and economic order and as subversive of morality, this creed was rejected by some Southern political and religious leaders for fear of its corrosive influence on their section's traditional power structure and on the virtue and civic responsibility of their section's people. Charging that the Civil War had been fought to prevent the products of Yankee civilization from corrupting their region's culture, they fervently called instead for a society based not on mere material prosperity, but on moral rectitude, natural social and racial hierarchies, plantation economy, and a religious reverence for the Confederate past--in effect, they offered an Old South creed for the New South era.

The object of this New South critique can be found in the rubble of the post-Civil War South. That bloody four-year conflict

brought waste and destruction to the region's economy. Businesses were either smashed or forced to suspend operation; some major cities were razed to the ground and large parts of others plundered and damaged; farms and plantations were wrecked from both fire and neglect. What little industry existed prior to the conflict was nearly snuffed out. Torn up railroad tracks and paralyzed river traffic left transportation in chaos. Even agriculture was slow to recover its pre-war levels; and by necessity, more emphasis was placed on the cultivation of food crops than cotton in 1865. Moreover, abolition of slavery shattered the region's labor system, producing a farm labor crisis and liquidating an asset in which much agricultural capital had been invested.¹

From out of this wreckage there appeared in the South a new class of men, commercial in outlook and committed to getting their section back on the road to recovery and progress. Comparing the smoldering ruins around them with the opulence and prosperity of the North, these manufacturers and businessmen openly challenged the old order which they believed had brought them to defeat. They charged that antebellum, agrarian society had been bested by the forces of modernity, and they therefore desired to rejuvenate the South along Northern, capitalistic lines. Believing that the North's social and economic institutions demonstrated its competitive superiority, these advocates of a new order forsook traditional

¹Idus Newby, The South: a History (New York, 1978), 235-236.

values by embracing a program of industrialization and modernization. If the South was ever to prosper again, these capitalists reasoned, it must cast off its agrarian millstone and adapt itself to the bourgeois revolution sweeping the rest of the nation.²

These New South men politically expressed their philosophy of modernism in the so-called Democratic-Conservative Party. Organized during Reconstruction and ascending to power with the redemption of the Southern state governments from radical control in the 1870s, Democratic-Conservatives bore little resemblance to their title, for they were neither conservative nor affiliated with the antebellum Democracy. Descended politically from the old Whig organization with its nationalistic-commercial outlook, the New South men severed all ties with agrarian based traditionalists who were wedded to the remains of the antebellum way of life. Instead, they sought for their section a future consistent with the conqueror's national objective--that the South should assume the North's social and economic characteristics--and accordingly, party leaders stressed the need for industrialization and material prosperity. They were basically utilitarians who sought to adapt to the new conditions of the post-war world, and who branded the advocates of tradition as "abstractionists," irrationally clinging to an old outmoded creed.³

²Jack P. Maddex, The Virginia Conservatives, 1867-1879: a Study in Reconstruction Politics (Chapel Hill, 1970), 276-283.

³Ibid., 283-287, 292-296; C. Vann Woodward, Origins of the New South, 1877-1913 (Baton Rouge, 1951), 1-22.

From its inception, the Democratic-Conservative party accompanied its demand for industrialization with calls for political moderation. Realizing that economic revitalization was dependent on a sympathetic political climate, Democratic-Conservative leaders formally acquiesced in the Reconstruction amendments and deemphasized the differences between their party's goals and objectives and those of the dominant Republican Party. Democratic-Conservatives thus sought to foster a stable political environment through cooperation with the Republican party in its governmental activities and budgetary expansion.⁴

The New Departure, as this policy came to be known, was in essence predicated upon revolutionary innovations. Breaking with the past, Democratic-Conservative Party leaders not only accepted the principle of black suffrage embodied in the Reconstruction amendments, but openly courted black voters; they supported assumption by the public sector of social welfare programs such as asylums, penitentiaries and hospitals; they pushed for free, public supported schools to provide the educated work force needed to attract Northern industry; and they stood for governmental intervention in the form of railroad promotion and other internal improvements as a way to encourage economic development and diversification. They also criticized slavery as enervating to the South's pre-war economy and heralded emancipation as an opportunity to free their section from

⁴Michael Perman, The Road to Redemption: Southern Politics, 1869-1879 (Chapel Hill, 1984), 67-68.

the chains of an antiquated, debilitating economic system. While not explicitly denying their Confederate heritage, these Whiggish New South men essentially wished to lay the past to rest and to get on with the business of progress.⁵

In this sense, the New Departure was a program of modernization, designed to supplant Southern tradition with a more rationally based society. As Edward Tannenbaum has noted, modernization includes the processes of "secularization, rationalization, bureaucratization, industrialization, urbanization, structural differentiation, consolidation of policy making, and the elimination of political and social inequalities."⁶ It is part of the life cycle of civilizations which forces traditional societal structures to modify the functions they perform or be replaced by new ones. Tannenbaum goes on to suggest that while the pattern of modernization has varied from one society to another it generally occurs in four phases: (1) the discovery of new scientific and technological knowledge which permits increasing control over man's environment; (2) revolutions in political institutions, whereby relations based on traditional status and arrangements are replaced by new legal relations based on property and voluntary contracts; (3) the transformation of

⁵Ibid., 58-68; Maddex, The Virginia Conservatives, 292-296; Paul Gaston, The New South Creed: a Study in Southern Mythmaking (Baton Rouge, 1970), 34-36.

⁶Edward Tannenbaum, 1900: the Generation Before the Great War (New York, 1976), 415.

economic and social structures; (4) the integration of society on a centralized, participatory functional basis.⁷

By the end of Reconstruction, the South had already experienced the first two phases of modernization. It, like the rest of the country, was the benefactor of the technological and political advances wrought by the Scientific Revolution and the English Revolution of 1688 and the American Revolution in 1776.⁸ The last two phases, however, had not yet come to pass; indeed, only limited progress into the third stage, that is a shift from agrarianism to industrialism, had been achieved, thus placing the fourth phase at some point in the future. Yet, it was precisely this final stage, the process whereby the individual's ties with his rural community and local traditions are superseded by his ties with the urban, industrial, national network which so alarmed the opponents of the new order.

The New Departure, then, was such a radical shift from the past that some within the Democratic party were unable to accept it. Beginning during Reconstruction, a small but vocal minority of planter-based elites began to criticize openly the economic and political policies of the Whig-industrialists. Committed to the retention of the values and ideals of the antebellum order, these

⁷Ibid., 417-419.

⁸The political advances referred to here are the end of the philosophy of the divine right of kings and affirmation of natural rights, government by the consent of the governed, and the natural right of revolution.

traditionalists sought to stem the advance of modernization. Perceiving industrialization as subversive of the pre-war social order, they argued that only in an agrarian community free of materialism could virtue and civic responsibility be ensured. They feared the threat of demagoguery which mass democracy would pose, once the social hierarchy was torn down; and they affirmed the efficacy of slavery and the justness of the Confederate cause and its goal of Southern independence.⁹

This criticism of the New Departure coalesced into an opposition wing of the Democratic-Conservative Party known by contemporaries and subsequent historians as the Bourbons. While the term itself is ambiguous and difficult to define, some basic generalizations can be formulated. As Roger L. Hart has noted in his study of Tennessee, the term Bourbonism can today be used in the same sense that it was used then: "to denote ingrained conservatism."¹⁰ Contemporaries first applied it during Reconstruction to indicate states'-rights planters and moss-back reactionaries who, it was charged, had learned nothing from the experience of the Civil War and were always casting their vision backwards toward the antebellum world.¹¹ More specifically, Bourbons perceived themselves as heirs

⁹Maddex, The Virginia Conservatives, 100-101; Perman, The Road to Redemption, 179; Jonathan M. Wiener, Social Origins of the New South: Alabama, 1865-1885 (Baton Rouge, 1978), 3-34, 89-90, 215-219.

¹⁰Roger L. Hart, Redeemers, Bourbons and Populists: Tennessee 1870-1896 (Baton Rouge, 1975), 56.

¹¹George B. Tindall, The Persistent Tradition in New South Politics (Baton Rouge, 1975), 5.

to the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian Democracy, a tradition to which they believed the Whiggish New South men were traitors. In keeping with the principles of the old Democratic Party, Bourbons nourished a deep distrust of government, arguing that its role in the private sector should be held to a minimum. As Michael Perman suggests in his study of Reconstruction politics, Bourbons believed that the very essence of the Democracy was "local self-government or home rule as it was often called; decentralization of power within the federal system; non-interference by government in matters of individual behavior and belief; and laissez-faire in the relations among economic interests as well as nations, that is, free trade."¹²

Like good Jacksonians, Bourbons held that government should be restricted in its ability to aid economic development. They bitterly resented Yankee interference in their states' internal affairs and opposed the pandering to black voters and centralization of governmental powers which permitted the social welfare programs, public schools and economic stimulation advocated by the Whig-industrialists. Yet, their power was limited at first; the popularity of the new road to recovery was so pervasive that it kept the old secessionist, antebellum leaders at bay during Reconstruction. It was not until "redemption" had been achieved and the depressed condition of Southern farming had generated reaction among agriculturalists that the agrarian, anti-statist interests, which

¹²Perman, The Road to Redemption, 80.

the Bourbons represented, were able to challenge the Whiggish, activist policies of the New Departure.¹³

State elections in the late 1870s reflected the rise of factions in the Democratic Party which had been ignored or pushed aside during Reconstruction. Across the South, Bourbon successes at the polls meant that the policies of governmental activism, initiated by the Republicans and adopted by the New South wing of the Democratic party, were under attack. Moreover, it also meant that the business interests which had prospered under the New Departure were now on the defensive. Bourbon resurgence signalled a return of the party's agrarian constituency and of the philosophy and leadership associated with the old Democracy. Its rise eroded much of the influence wielded by the Whigs, and not only jeopardized Whig ascendancy, but destroyed it.¹⁴

In this atmosphere of political rivalry and unrest, there erupted a war of ideas between the forces of modernity and tradition for control of Southern society. Political domination by the Whiggish New South faction may have been cast off by Bourbon resurgence, but this did not mean that the previously ascendant group was immediately replaced and forced into a subordinate role by its challenger. Indeed, the twenty years following Reconstruction were a period in which neither planters nor industrialists were a hegemonic class in the South; and thus it was a time of open and hot debate as to which

¹³Ibid., 76-77, 181-182, 221-263.

¹⁴Ibid., 192, 264-265.

group would eventually dominate. Understandably, both wanted to wrest power from the other, because to do so would enable the victor to dictate the path of economic development, and to shape the destiny of its section.

Only recently have historians of the New South acknowledged that a struggle for hegemony occurred after Reconstruction. Traditional scholarship, first established by C. Vann Woodward in his Origins of the New South, held that the post-Civil War South was dominated by a new middle class of businessmen and entrepreneurs who stepped in to fill the vacuum created by the wartime destruction of the planter elite.¹⁵ Such an interpretation either ignored or failed to recognize that redemption presented the Southern states with not a single, but a forked road to economic development. Indeed, the whole thesis that the South was first redeemed and then ruled by Whig-industrialists was predicated on the assumption that with planters and their agricultural interests swept aside there was little, if any, disagreement over the nature of future economic development.

Yet, within the past decade, the Woodward thesis, which informed historical thinking for thirty years, has eroded. Recent scholars, most notably Jonathan Wiener and Dwight Billings, have

¹⁵ Woodward, Origins of the New South, 1-22, 179. Most works prior to the 1970s followed the Woodward thesis, including the major texts. For further discussion of the persistence of the Woodward thesis in historical writing see Sheldon Hackney, "Origins of the New South in Retrospect," Journal of Southern History 38 (1972): 191-216.

argued that the Civil War did not destroy the old planter aristocracy; instead, pre-war elites, unwilling to hand over the reins of their region's destiny to an emerging industrial middle class, came to dominate Southern society and politics in the post-war period. Planters dictated economic development, retaining the plantation at the center of their region's economy while allowing the establishment of limited industrialization of a nature and scale which in no way threatened their agricultural labor supply. Wiener has even gone so far as to contend that a genuine contest took place for control of the South's social structure, and that during the period immediately following redemption neither planters nor industrialists were a hegemonic class. And thus, Wiener has noted, as both strove for ascendancy, they generated considerable debate as to which path the South would take to economic development, and upon which foundation--agrarian or industrial--the section would rebuild its shattered pre-war economy.¹⁶

By the early 1880s, then, the question which faced Southerners was a simple one, albeit difficult to answer: would the process of modernization be allowed to continue? In other words, would the transformation of their section from an agrarian, rural, aristocratic society to an industrial, urban, democratic society set in motion by the economic and political policies of Reconstruction be

¹⁶Dwight Billings, Planters and the Making of a "New South": Class, Politics and Development in North Carolina, 1865-1900 (Chapel Hill, 1979); Wiener, Social Origins of the New South, 1-32, 186-221. See also Lewis Nicholas Wynne, The Continuity of Cotton: Planter Politics in Georgia, 1865-1892 (Macon, 1986).

completed? The Bourbons and New South men knew the answer with which their respective party wings and classes would reply; and they looked to intellectual and religious leaders to justify those divergent responses to the Southern people.

CHAPTER II

THE BOURBON PHILOSOPHER

The war of ideas spawned by the struggle for hegemony gave birth to intellectuals on both sides who either developed a new world view or who justified the old. Their respective tasks required them either to fashion fresh, innovative ideas or to reformulate an older vision and then to reapply it creatively to new conditions. Through the art of persuasion, both camps sought to convince the Southern people of the correctness of their arguments, and to induce them to support and legitimize their programs of change or continuity.

On one hand was the army of New South ideologists, men like Henry W. Grady, Daniel Augustus Tompkins, Hathaway Edmonds and Walter Hines Page. With the exception of Tompkins, these spokesmen for the new order were from social origins outside the mainstream of planter society. They came from families which had not been enthusiastic about either slavery or secession, and whose livelihood was based on manufacturing and trade. They were all journalists or connected in some way with the newspaper business; and all, save one, were born during the 1850s and grew up during a time of their region's greatest failure. Though too young to serve in the war, they still experienced as children and adolescents the pain of war and the humiliation of Reconstruction; and, not surprisingly, they

looked northward in search of the reasons for their own section's poverty and economic insufficiency.¹

The crusaders for an urban, industrialized society fashioned a program for the assimilation of their section into the mainstream of American progress. From his headquarters in the rebuilt city of Atlanta, Henry Grady, the undisputed prophet of the new order, waged through the pages of the Constitution the campaign to remake the South in the image of the North. His creed included utilization of untouched natural resources and diversification in agriculture; development of manufacturing and commerce to replace eventually the exclusively agrarian economy; protection of black freedoms, such as the franchise and other legal rights and privileges; and an end to sectional enmity which might hinder the realization of these goals. The idea of a "new" South which he propagated was basically a program of action--one which rejected the past and was full of promise for the future. It held out to Southerners the opportunity to sever themselves from their image as poor, backward and guilt-ridden, proffering instead the chance to realize the dream of the successful American life, by adopting the ways of the industrial age.²

On the other hand were the defenders of the antebellum regime, of whom Robert Lewis Dabney, John C. Calhoun Newton, Charles

¹Paul Gaston, The New South Creed: a Study in Southern Myth-making (Baton Rouge, 1970), 48-53.

²Ibid., 190-191; Raymond Nixon, Henry W. Grady, Spokesman of the New South (New York, 1943), 6, 213-215.

Colcock Jones and Albert T. Bledsoe are representative figures. Older than their New South adversaries, the intellectual proponents of the old order were from backgrounds deeply rooted in plantation society. They were mostly Confederate veterans whose formative years had been spent at a time when the South was prosperous and occupied an important position in national affairs. Many were ministers and had defended slavery as a just and benevolent institution, sanctioned by God; and they were unwilling to admit that they, or their cause, had ever been wrong. Moreover, as the guardians of a Calvinistic tradition, they were obliged to combat any movement which offended their moral sensibilities by making an idol of material prosperity.³

These Old South men represent an ecclesiastical tradition which evolved in defense of the South's social order. Prior to the Civil War, Southern clergymen had stepped forward to champion planter interests. As James Farmer has noted, the Biblical defense of slavery rose simultaneously with the secular, and cannot be considered as a separate development. Motivated by the desire for more prestige and greater impact on their society, as well as by their self-image as the defenders of the religious and moral purity of their section's people, Southern pastors shielded their region's social order from the verbal assaults of Northern abolitionists. Farmer has suggested that these clergymen even went so far as to

³Gaston, The New South Creed, 154-158; Jonathan Wiener, Social Origins of the New South: Alabama, 1865-1885 (Baton Rouge, 1975), 196-197, 207.

fashion a "metaphysical Confederacy," that is, a concept of Southern nationhood, which prepared the way for the political one.⁴

Leading in the creation of this Southern belief system was South Carolinian and Presbyterian cleric James Henley Thornwell. Recognized as the foremost Southern Presbyterian of his generation, Thornwell served at various times as President of South Carolina College, professor at Columbia Theological Seminary and as editor of the prominent Southern Presbyterian Review. An articulate defender of slavery, he became an outstanding spokesman for the new Confederacy and was instrumental in establishing the separate Southern Presbyterian Assembly in 1861. His untimely death the following summer cut short a brilliant career and prevented him from seeing the fate of the new nation he had done so much to forge.⁵

The most outspoken defender of the ancien regime was Robert Lewis Dabney, another Presbyterian cleric and teacher. A theological disciple of Thornwell, Dabney, in the opinion of contemporaries and historians alike, was the most influential theologian of his denomination during the post-war period. In fact, it was generally held among Southern churchmen that Dabney assumed Thornwell's mantle

⁴James Oscar Farmer, Jr., The Metaphysical Confederacy: James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values (Macon, 1986), 9-40. See also E. Brooks Holifield, The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795-1860 (Durham, 1978), and Anne Loveland, Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order (Baton Route, 1980), ix.

⁵For more on Thornwell's life see Farmer, The Metaphysical Confederacy.

following the latter's death in 1862.⁶ Described by historian Francis Butler Simkins as the "Virginia gentleman par excellence," Dabney was among the earliest and most vociferous of all who entered the ideological fray.⁷ Indeed, none surpassed him in sheer fury. A striking figure, six feet in height with a long, flowing beard, Dabney was particularly suited to intellectual combat. Those who knew him were impressed by his great energy of body, mind and will, and by his razor-sharp reasoning ability. He was naturally argumentative and was a man of fiery passion and deep conviction. A contemporary who witnessed a Dabney address wrote of the clergyman:

His voice trembled with emotion, his frame shook, his eyes snapped fire, and his arms flew vigorously in all directions. His audience was held in agony of suppressed emotion. It was difficult to judge which were more stifled by suppression, those who agreed with him or those who differed from him. . . . When he finished, we felt as men fell when a tornado had just swept by them. We drew a long breath to relieve the lungs.⁸

An able and prolific writer, Dabney's books and articles all bear witness to his love of polemic. "No man," observed Dabney's friend and early biographer Thomas Cary Johnson, "liked more to put his thinking on paper and through the press."⁹ Johnson styled Dabney

⁶For an estimation of Dabney's status see Ernest Trice Thompson, Presbyterians in the South, vol. 2 (Richmond, 1963), 446; and also Morton Howison Smith, Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology (Amsterdam, 1962), 121, 183.

⁷Quoted in Boyd Cathey, "Robert Lewis Dabney and the New South Creed," Southern Partisan 4 (1984): 47.

⁸Thomas Cary Johnson, Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney (Richmond, 1903), 321.

⁹*Ibid.*, 563.

"the Great Conservative," and admitted that as such, "he was consequently at war with much in his age."¹⁰ Another contemporary noted of Dabney that, although other ministers were more eloquent, "for blasting rocks, I would take Dr. Dabney."¹¹ His success as a preacher, teacher, theologian, philosopher, political economist, architect, and historian attests to the magnitude and power of his intellect and force of character.

Dabney's numerous sermons, speeches and writings formed the nucleus of the New South critique. Through the power of his pen, the Virginia clergyman gave shape to and articulated the beleaguered value system of the planter class. Whether before Confederate veterans' organizations, Presbyterian congregations or his own students, he was always questioning and probing the basic assumptions of modern, industrial society. Notwithstanding the assertion by George B. Tindall that the Bourbons "produced no master ideologue, no John Locke or Edmund Burke," Dabney, by his unrelenting assault on the philosophy of the New South, came to be the single most important figure in the defense of the antebellum order, and a genuine philosopher of Southern Bourbonism.¹²

Born in 1820 on the banks of the South Anna River in Louisa County, Virginia, Dabney was the second son of a moderately

¹⁰Ibid., 567-568.

¹¹In Memoriam Robert Lewis Dabney (Knoxville, 1899), 31.

¹²George B. Tindall, The Persistent Tradition in New South Politics (Baton Rouge, 1975), 21.

successful planter.¹³ Descended from the old Tidewater gentry, Dabney's family had played an active role in the Revolution. His great uncle, Colonel Charles Dabney, had not only served in the Continental army, but also was a member of the Society of the Cincinnati and was an intimate friend of Chief Justice John Marshall. He could also claim, on his mother's side, kinship to the prominent Randolphs of Virginia. This distinguished heritage played an influential role in Robert's early childhood and was an integral part of perhaps the most significant influence affecting his thought--post-liberal Virginia culture. Repudiating the rationalistic, humanitarian trend characteristic of Jefferson's age, this post-liberal mentality was in essence highly conservative. It drew upon a Hobbesian view of human nature and government, according to which man tends to act in his own self interest and, thus, is in need of restraint via governmental control. Structured upon the premise that racial and social hierarchies are natural states of mankind, this view tended to subvert Virginian, and Southern, belief in Jeffersonian democracy and Lockean environmentalism, and thus provided a justification for slavery; for it was argued that the degree of restraint exercised over an individual was to be determined by his intellectual and moral condition. Since blacks were considered inferior in both respects, they could justifiably be held in servitude,

¹³Henry Alexander White, Southern Presbyterian Leaders (New York, 1911), 382.

not only for their own good, but also for the good of others.¹⁴

It was in this conservative, aristocratic world that Robert Dabney matured into manhood. His formal education began with the study of Latin at age seven under the tutelage of his older brother; Greek, algebra and geometry were eventually added. By the time he was sixteen, Dabney was sufficiently prepared to further his studies on an advanced level; he therefore departed his native county for Hampden-Sydney College, where he arrived in June of 1836.¹⁵ The tall, slender, somewhat awkward youth was almost immediately unimpressed with the faculty or the facilities. "This place is not very remarkable for anything at all," he confided to his mother, "except the poverty, for the college stands in the middle of an old field full of gullies and weeds, and the cows of the neighborhood come up to the very windows with their bells making such a noise that I cannot study."¹⁶ Despite such distractions, Dabney did well in school. He progressed rapidly in his course work while maintaining a voluminous correspondence with his family. Like most teenagers away from parents for the first time, young Dabney exhibited in his letters a homesickness and loneliness which isolation from the opposite sex only aggravated. "It is almost impossible

¹⁴Idus Newby, The South: a History (New York, 1978), 173; Clement Eaton, Freedom of Thought in the Old South (New York, 1951), 27-31; Frank Bell Lewis, "Robert Lewis Dabney, Southern Presbyterian Apologist" (Ph. D. diss., Duke University, 1946), 213-216.

¹⁵White, Southern Presbyterian Leaders, 382.

¹⁶Robert L. Dabney to Elizabeth Dabney, July 23, 1836, Robert Lewis Dabney Papers, University of Virginia.

to get into company here," he complained to his mother. "I have not spoken to a lady since I have been here . . . except the wives of some of the professors." He feared that his education needed something more than book learning, and that he had to "get into company" frequently or he would leave college "like an old rusty book that has been lying around in an old useless library for a hundred years."¹⁷

The sudden death of his father in 1837 soon forced Dabney to quit his studies and return home to assist his mother in managing the family plantation. With his own hands, Dabney set to work alongside the slaves plowing fields, planting crops of corn and wheat and rebuilding the old grist mill. He kept himself intellectually active by teaching school; and in the autumn of 1839, he decided to resume his suspended education by entering the University of Virginia, from which he graduated with the degree of Master of Arts three years later.¹⁸

Dabney's course work at Virginia first exposed him to ideas and concepts which were to play an important role in his later career. His notebooks indicate that he was taught by his professors that industry was superior to agriculture for making a nation rich. He also learned that the division of labor created better citizens, whose lack of job diversification would spur them on to mental pursuits. Labor at a single, repetitive task supposedly would encourage

¹⁷Robert L. Dabney to Elizabeth Dabney, June 28, 1836, *ibid.*

¹⁸White, Southern Presbyterian Leaders, 382-383.

workers to better their minds through study and conversation.

Dabney, however, was not convinced. Citing Jean Baptiste Say, the French political economist, Dabney reflected that Americans as farmers were "much better to meet emergencies, to occupy various stations well, as that of tradesman, citizen, magistrate, etc.," than industrialized Europeans, because "our citizens have not generally much introduction to the division of labor and they indulge in greater versatility of employment. . . ." While conceding that mechanical operation might improve the intellectual habits of some laborers, he disagreed with his teachers that it would "drive all workers into conversation and mental enjoyments." Some, he feared, would become "melancholy and desponding." The impact of industrialization fascinated Dabney, for he could see that even though the United States was then agricultural, "the day is not far distant," he opined, "when there must be a large manufacturing class here."¹⁹

It is also important to note Dabney's attitude toward slavery at this point in his life. While in his twenties, the future defender of the "peculiar institution" as a positive good viewed his section's economic system as a sort of necessary evil. He obviously had gotten his fill of the planter's life while working his mother's farm for two years. "It seems to me," he complained, "that there could be no greater curse inflicted on us than to be compelled to manage a parcel of Negroes. Whatever may be the influence of slavery

¹⁹"Political Economy," notes by Robert Lewis Dabney, 1840-41, Dabney Papers, University of Virginia.

on the happiness of Negroes it would effectually destroy that of the master if they were all like me." Yet, the rigors of plantation management in no way made an abolitionist of the young Virginian. Indeed, emancipation, he contended, would "ruin the African race in the Southern states," because blacks eventually "wane away like the unfortunate Indians by the effects of their own vices. . . ." He did not believe, however, that Southerners should content themselves with maintaining slavery in its present form. As it then existed, it was "liable to most erroneous abuses"; and even though abolition was impossible, Dabney believed that "much might be done to modify the system and remove abuses (of which the greatest is domestic slave trade) while we retain the good parts of it."²⁰

Probably the most significant event during these formative years was Dabney's conversion to Christianity. While a student at Hampden-Sydney, he had professed faith in Christ and had been received into New Providence Presbyterian Church, his family's house of worship in Louisa County. This religious experience provided the genesis of the second most important influence affecting his thought--Old School Presbyterianism. Deeply rooted in scholastic Calvinism, the Old School tradition held two doctrines, the infallibility of Scripture and the total depravity of man, which interacted in a complementary way with the post-liberal culture from which Dabney emerged. First, by his literal interpretation of the

²⁰Robert L. Dabney to C. Woodson Payne, June 23, 1840, in Johnson, Life and Letters of Dabney, 67.

Bible and his rigid acceptance of the authority of scripture, Dabney was afforded what he considered to be the decisive argument in the justification of slavery; for from passages in both Old and New Testament, he was later able to fashion a defense of human bondage. Furthermore, his belief in man's fallen state and evil nature only served to reinforce his low estimate of mankind and provided yet another argument for restrictions on human rights and privileges. The doctrine of original sin could allow Dabney to repudiate the Jeffersonian concept of man's inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and to reject the liberal assertion of man's eventual perfectability by the application of reason to society.²¹

Dabney's new-found faith prompted him, following graduation from the University of Virginia, to decline the offer of an editorial position on the staff of a Richmond newspaper and instead to enter Union Theological Seminary, then located on the Hampden-Sydney campus. Ordained and licensed to preach by Hanover Presbytery in May 1846, he subsequently married Lavinia Morrison, daughter of the minister at New Providence. After spending six years as pastor of Tinkling Springs Church in the Shenandoah Valley, Dabney returned to Union in the summer of 1853 to accept the Chair of Church History and Government. There, he engaged not only in teaching but also in preaching regularly to his students in the college church, the

²¹Ibid., 42-43; Lewis, "Robert Lewis Dabney," 220-223. While the description of Dabney's conversion seems inconsistent with usual Presbyterian practice, the language used here is Dabney's own.

construction of which he personally superintended. This was, incidentally, the second of four churches he was to design; and like his earlier architectural work at Tinkling Springs, it reflected his taste for classical lines and simple, refined beauty.²² In addition to these responsibilities, Dabney began writing numerous articles for both religious and secular papers, displaying the talent for polemic that was to mark his career.²³

In 1859, Dabney's star began to rise. Rejecting an offer to join the faculty at Princeton University, Dabney assumed the recently vacated position at Union of Professor of Systematic Theology, a field to which he would dedicate most of his time and energy. From this point until his death almost forty years later, Dabney would wield immense influence in his church by imposing upon it his scripturally-based teachings. "He was soon to become," declared a fellow clergyman, "one of the most efficient expounders of Calvinistic theology that our country has ever known."²⁴ His ideas carried even more weight because of the manner in which they were conveyed to his students. It was said of Dabney that he was the greatest teacher whom most of his pupils ever knew.²⁵ His pedagogical technique was a combination of lecture and socratic

²²Herbert Clarence Bradshaw, "The Preacher Who Designed Four Churches," Virginia Cavalcade 8 (1958): 32-42.

²³White, Southern Presbyterian Leaders, 383-385.

²⁴Ibid., 385.

²⁵Johnson, Life and Letters of Dabney, 553.

method, whereby students would present their own treatment of a subject followed by their professor's reflections as a summary. Apparently, Dabney taught with the same passion and zeal that he brought to every endeavor, moving one of his disciples to claim for his mentor, "he not only gave to us his truth, but himself."²⁶

By this time in his career, Dabney had ceased to urge reform in his section's slave regime. The articles which he was writing in defense of slavery on moral and scriptural grounds reflected a retreat from his earlier belief that slavery was a necessary evil. He now took the position that Negro bondage was not only a just institution, but represented the proper relationship between the two races. Though still concerned that masters treat their servants with all fairness and benevolence, he no longer condemned certain aspects of the system, and resented interference by outsiders in the issue. Not long after John Brown's Harper's Ferry Raid, Dabney advised an agent of the American Tract Society: "I recommend that you save your time and money. . . . The argument of the question of whether slavery is a righteous relation (where humanely exercised) is finished at the South. We have examined that question to our satisfaction. . . ."²⁷

When the sectional crisis erupted with the secession of the lower South, Dabney sought to maintain peace. For years he had

²⁶Ibid., 554.

²⁷Robert L. Dabney to Ined Warren, December 13, 1859, Dabney Papers, University of Virginia.

considered himself a Union Democrat; and like most of his fellow churchmen during the 1850s, he was ardently anti-secessionist.²⁸ While he viewed the Free Soil movement as "a wicked insult and threat to the rights of the South," Dabney did not think it should be made "the causus belli."²⁹ In an article entitled "A Pacific Appeal to Christians" which appeared in the Central Presbyterian in March 1861, Dabney urged Southern Christians to reject what he termed the "unnecessary rupture" of the Union. "Is it not due," he asked his readers, "to our country, to our race, to our God . . . that we should hold the irreparable step as long as there is a spark of hope?"³⁰ But, while he counseled restraint and caution for those states yet to secede, Dabney had little sympathy with those which had already broken away. South Carolina was particularly irritating to him. "The little impudent vixen has gone beyond all patience," he deplored. "She is as great a pest as the abolitionists. . . ."³¹ His primary concern was for the safety of Virginia, which he feared the imprudence of the fire-eaters had compromised; and he therefore proposed schemes to save his native state from being caught in a cross-fire in the event of war between Washington and the cotton states.³²

²⁸Robert L. Dabney, "Autobiography," unpublished MS, Dabney Papers, University of Virginia, 31.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Johnson, Life and Letters of Dabney, 215-217.

³¹Robert L. Dabney to Elizabeth Dabney, December 28, 1860, *ibid.*, 215.

³²Ibid.

Yet, when Virginia promptly seceded following President Lincoln's call for volunteers to put down the "rebellion," Dabney quickly cast aside all moderation. He had advocated unionism as long as it was possible to do so with "honor and dignity"; but, feeling that "the point of furthest endurance had been passed at length," Dabney embraced the cause of Southern independence.³³ Throughout the summer and fall of 1861, he served as a chaplain to a Confederate infantry regiment, preaching regularly to the troops. Frequently in attendance at these services was General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, who offered Dabney the position of Assistant Adjutant General with the rank of major. Although considering himself insufficiently trained for military office--"I had sense enough to know how little I knew"--Dabney reluctantly accepted the post, at Jackson's urging.³⁴ Serving as the General's unofficial chief-of-staff, Dabney continued in this capacity during the famous Valley Campaign and the Seven Days' Battles around Richmond.

There is every indication that Dabney found the life of a soldier decidedly unpleasant and distasteful. He complained that he was not of the constitution to campaign actively with Jackson, who postponed his own comfort and expected his staff to do likewise, "with needless rigidity."³⁵ Not only was Dabney deprived of his

³³Robert L. Dabney to S. I. Prince, April 20, 1861 in *ibid.*, 225-231.

³⁴Dabney, "Autobiography," 36.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 38.

baggage and other amenities when Jackson ordered these luxuries to the rear, but also Dabney was forced to subsist on only the meagerest of diets. It was reported, with some humor, that during the engagement at Malvern Hill in the summer of 1862 the parson-soldier had prudently placed an old gate post between himself and the enemy's fire, a charge which Dabney later indignantly denied.³⁶ He did insist, however, that the General kept him so busy and that he had so little to eat that he eventually broke down and would have died from overwork rather than Yankee bullets, had not Jackson ordered him to take sick leave.³⁷ Dabney claimed later to have suffered from "camp fever," which may have been nothing more than an excuse to relinquish his responsibilities as chief-of-staff after his disappointing military experience.³⁸ At any rate, Dabney obediently went home, where he experienced another bout with "camp fever" which, he recalled, "brought me to death's door."³⁹ Indeed, he claimed that his health was so shattered that Jackson's chief surgeon warned the reverend that if he attempted to resume his duties with the army, he would surely die.⁴⁰

³⁶Robert L. Dabney, "The Truth of History," Southern Historical Society Papers 19 (1891: 376-377; J. William Jones, "Reminiscences of the Army of Northern Virginia," Southern Historical Society Papers 9 (1881): 566-567.

³⁷Dabney, "Autobiography," 39.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 39-40.

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 40.

So, Dabney gladly returned to Hampden-Sydney, where he spent a year in recovery and thought. It was during this time of relative quiet that he wrote his Defense of Virginia and the South, a treatise justifying slavery and the war for Southern independence. He had hoped that through the use of his pen he might be able "to repulse the assaults of our enemies against our social order," while proving to his comrades in the army that the "labors of the scholar, while more humble, are not less necessary to the welfare of our country than those of the soldier."⁴¹ When Jackson fell in May of 1863, Dabney began work on a biography of the general. After this project, his duties at the college were so light (all of the young men having entered the service) that Dabney returned to the front and resumed preaching to the army. As Drew Faust has recently noted, declining Southern fortunes sparked a wave of religious revivalism which swept through the Confederate forces during the last years of the war.⁴² Caught up in this spiritual outpouring, Dabney ministered in the ranks until the surrender at Appomattox. Yet, while he was willing to share the glories of a soldier's life, he was once more unwilling to share in its hardships; for when the situation appeared hopeless for Lee's army once Richmond fell, Dabney left and hid in Buckingham County in order to escape certain capture and the very

⁴¹Robert L. Dabney to Thomas J. Jackson, March 5, 1863, Dabney Papers, University of Virginia.

⁴²Drew Gilpin Faust, "Christian Soldiers: the Meaning of Revivalism in the Confederate Army," Journal of Southern History, 53 (1987): 63-90.

real possibility of a Federal prison.⁴³ Again, his devotion to the "cause" had been tested and found wanting.

The end of the Confederacy was devastating for Dabney. With its fall, the way of life he had cherished was swept away forever. "He loved its [the old order's] activities, habits and modes of thought," recalled a friend years later. "He was passionately attached to it, for the truth and justice and the benevolence which he believed underlay and informed it all."⁴⁴ Federal Reconstruction added to his misery. Fearing what he styled "the inevitable moral degradation" of military occupation and its attending "acquiescence, subserviency, [and] suppression of the liberty of speaking on our outraged rights," Dabney contemplated emigrating. Transplanting Southern culture in another country, he believed, was the only way to "save any of the true Christianity of the South."⁴⁵ During the winter of 1866-67, Dabney began corresponding with former Confederate General Jubal Early about establishing a colony of Southern emigres, possibly in New Zealand. Both men preferred that country's natural resources, all white population and congenial climate over South America, where, they suspected, swamps, insects and heat would prove enervating to unacclimated North Americans. Eventually, however, once Dabney saw that his ability to speak and write freely was

⁴³White, Southern Presbyterian Leaders, 388-389; Dabney, "Autobiography," 56.

⁴⁴Johnson, Life and Letters of Dabney, 292.

⁴⁵Robert L. Dabney to Charles W. Dabney, August 7, 1865, in *ibid.*, 305.

in no way hindered by his state's Reconstruction administration, he abandoned the plan as cost-prohibitive, and actually unnecessary.⁴⁶

Dabney resumed his teaching and preaching responsibilities at Union Seminary and worked to get his life and that of his family back to normal. Times were so hard that he was forced to put in, with his own hands, a crop of corn; and to supplement his income, he conducted a girls' school in his home.⁴⁷ By the early 1870s, however, his financial status had improved sufficiently to purchase a home close to the mountains in Amherst County and to relocate his family there in order to escape eastern Virginia which, in his opinion, was "becoming malarious and . . . fatally nigger-ridden."⁴⁸ Yet, despite his decision to remain in his native state under Federal authority, Dabney was never reconciled to defeat. The wreck of his section's dream of independence had transformed him. "The iron," a friend ominously noted, had entered his soul."⁴⁹

But, Dabney's greatest fear was not of his Northern conquerors. True, they and their culture were to be hated for the danger they posed to Southern virtue and honor. Yankee civilization,

⁴⁶Jubal Early to Robert L. Dabney, November 29, 1866, February 25, March 14, 1867, Robert Lewis Dabney Papers, Union Theological Seminary.

⁴⁷White, Southern Presbyterian Leaders, 389.

⁴⁸Dabney, "Autobiography," 56.

⁴⁹Johnson, Life and Letters of Dabney, 294.

Dabney lamented, was snuffing out "the independence, the honor, the hospitality, the integrity, the everything which constitutes Southern character."⁵⁰ Yet, the end of Reconstruction meant the withdrawal of Federal bayonets and restoration of home rule. With Northern troops departed and carpetbaggers turned out of office, Dabney's concern shifted to what he perceived as an even greater threat--the Southern Yankees in his midst, the advocates of the New South Creed.

⁵⁰Robert L. Dabney to M. D. Hoge, August 16, 1865, in *ibid.*, 305.

CHAPTER III

THE NEW SOUTH CRITIQUE

The criticism which Dabney leveled against the New South Creed was partly defensive and partly offensive. It was not simply an inquisition to purge the Southland of heretical modernists while offering no answers, no alternative plan to the one advanced by the spokesmen of the new order. Essentially, the Virginia clergyman fashioned a view of the past and of the future, a comprehensive world order which looked backward in affirmation of the South's Confederate heritage while gazing forward to a revitalization of antebellum society, modified to meet the exigencies of post-war conditions. What Dabney offered was an Old South creed for the New South era, a chance to nullify Yankee victory on the battlefield by establishing a unique Southern culture, free of the twin monsters of modernism and materialism. In other words, by preventing modernization and by forging a distinct cultural entity, Dabney hoped to achieve in peace what he and the planter class he represented had not been able to achieve in war--the creation of a separate Southern people.

The task would be difficult at best. To provide the Bourbons with a philosophy potent enough to neutralize the threat posed by the Whig-industrialists, Dabney would have to expose the flaws of the New South Creed and explode its myth of progress. He also would have to depict a vision of an Old South for new times constructed

in such a way as to appeal to the Southern electorate while not yielding in principle. Dabney would have to persuade the common people that the old order with its aristocratic, hierarchical structure was superior to the democratic, liberal program of the new regime. In this way, he could muster and build the power base upon which conservative social, religious and political leaders could alter the South's course to modernism. His strategy, therefore, would require an appeal to the common man's religious mores, to his adherence to the agrarian myth and fear of industrialization, to his Negrophobia and to his sacrifices in the Confederate struggle for independence.

Dabney acknowledged that the war had wrought changes which would have to be accepted. "There is a new era," he ruefully observed, "and hence there must be a 'New South.'"¹ Yet, with an alien Northern culture sweeping into Southern society, he feared that the South, by rejecting the old order, would head disastrously toward moral degeneracy. In fact, underlying his critique was a deeply embedded fear of decadence and decay, which manifested itself in a philosophy of anti-materialism. This concern over the corrupting influence of wealth and power was fundamental to Dabney's attack against the new South ideologists. Dabney knew that the people of his section would be quick to attribute Northern victory in the war to its material prosperity and riches. "'The North triumphed by

¹Robert L. Dabney, The New South: a Discourse Delivered at Hampden Sidney College (Raleigh, 1883), 15.

its wealth.' Here is the temptation to the New South, to which I already see ominous symptoms of yielding to make wealth the idol, the all in all of sectional greatness," he told the graduating class at Hampden-Sydney in 1882. But, he warned, "the only sure wealth of the state is in cultured, heroic men, who intelligently know their duty and are calmly prepared to sacrifice all else, including life, to maintain the right."² Dabney did not oppose earning money and providing for one's self and family; riches, he contended, are a positive good when "consecrated to the noble uses of charity and public spirit. . . ." He admonished the young men before him, however, that riches, if pursued as an end in themselves, would ruin the South, rather than deliver it. "That people which makes selfish, material good its god," he apocalyptically warned, "is doomed."³

Furthermore, the rapidity with which the New South men sought to reshape Southern society appalled Dabney. He rejected their practicality as a compromise of principle. No matter how much lip service they paid to the Confederate past, their willingness to accept Yankee civilization was an admission that defeat meant that the cause was wrong and the antebellum way of life was now obsolete. He derided one New South advocate who, while claiming to be "as proud of having been a staunch Confederate like the rest of us," now, "like a good child, thanks our conquerors for whipping the

²Ibid., 19.

³Ibid., 18-19.

folly and naughtiness out of him, although with whips dipped in hell-fire."⁴ All attempts by such men to create a social organization based on reason rather than tradition he branded as "sensualistic" and, therefore, repugnant to God. Indeed, Dabney interpreted their efforts to fashion a more practical society at the expense of time-honored institutions as part of a world-wide drift toward Utilitarianism. In its strictest sense, this philosophy of Utilitarianism contained the belief that every human action should be guided by whether or not it augments human happiness; and therefore, the only political, social or economic system to be tolerated is that which brings the greatest pleasure to the greatest number of people.⁵ Not surprisingly, Dabney condemned this doctrine as "erroneous." It discredited any notion not confirmable by the senses, he argued, thereby threatening the very tenets of the Christian faith. He denounced it as tending to obliterate "moral distinctions" and as leading ultimately to "the destruction of moral responsibility; to materialism; to a denial of the supernatural; and thus, to atheism."⁶

Dabney launched the preliminary phase of his renunciation of the New South's materialism and utilitarianism by fashioning a view

⁴Robert L. Dabney, "George Washington Cable in the Century Magazine," Southern Historical Society Papers 13 (1885): 149.

⁵Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, eds., History of Political Philosophy (Chicago, 1963), 621-624.

⁶Robert L. Dabney, The Sensualistic Philosophy of the Nineteenth Century Considered (New York, 1887), 2-3.

of the past different from the one created by the New South ideologists. He did this first by justifying slavery, the central feature of the antebellum world, upon legal, economic, ethical and scriptural grounds. The peculiar institution was forced upon the South "against her protests, by the cupidity of New England and by the tyranny and cupidity of Old England," he argued; and although rooted in the South without its agency, it was adopted, recognized by the Constitution and protected by the Supreme Court of the United States. It was "shown by events to be beneficent to the Africans" whom it enslaved by promoting in them happiness and morality through religious instruction, and by attempting to turn them away from their propensity to "waste and laziness." Slavery represented the proper relationship between the races within the framework of the racial and social hierarchies that Dabney subscribed to. Moreover, it was sanctioned by the word of God itself, where it was recognized "in the solemn sacrament of the Old Testament circumcision . . . expressly authorized to God's chosen people, Israel . . . and not removed by the future light of the New Testament." By enslaving blacks, the South created the "most prosperous and comfortable peasantry in the world," fully equal as laborers, if not superior, to free white workers in the North. And with this disciplined work force at its command, the South "developed a magnificent agriculture," generated great wealth, and "kept pace with the progress of its gigantic rival."⁷

⁷Robert L. Dabney, A Defense of Virginia and through Her of the South (New York, 1867), 349-351, 209, 297.

Having justified, at least in his own mind, the institution of slavery, Dabney then declared the moral righteousness and constitutionality of the war for Southern independence. The Virginia clergyman believed in its goal of a separate Southern nation. The war, he avowed, had been waged "to save the liberties transmitted by our fathers."⁸ He denied, despite the North's assertion, that slavery had caused the war, claiming instead that "on the Northern side it was merely the pretext employed by that aggressive section to carry out ambitious projects of domination";⁹ that the Yankees had determined that the Southern states, which they considered debased by the "sin" of slavery, would not enjoy an equal status in the Union; and that they therefore had sought by force to relegate the South into a subordinate position. Recognizing that failure to acquiesce "in such inequality on such a ground must mean despotism and slavery for us and our children," Southerners resisted Northern invasion.¹⁰ They had fought not to extend and perpetuate slavery, but "for the great cause of moral right, justice and regulated liberty."¹¹ But, he acknowledged, "subsequent events have shown that we were attempting to defend and preserve a system of free government which had become impossible by the denigration of the

⁸Dabney, The New South, 3.

⁹Dabney, A Defense of Virginia, 354.

¹⁰Dabney, "George Washington Cable," 150.

¹¹Dabney, A Defense of Virginia, 355.

age."¹² Northern victory had overturned the old system, and thus, made inevitable a new South, which would have to be accepted, "though it was our duty to fight to prevent it."¹³

Yet, the new order, Dabney argued, need not reject the old. No step toward the future could be effectively made without reverence for the past. He warned the yeomanry of the consequences of forgetting too much in the name of Progress:

It behooves the New South, in dismissing the animosities of the past, to see to it that they retain all that was true in its principles or ennobling in its example. There are those pretending to this company who exclaim: "Let us bury the dead past. Its issues are all antiquated, and of no more practical significance. Let us forget the passions of the past. We are in a new world. Its new questions alone concern us." I rejoin: Be sure that the former issues are really dead before you bury them! There are issues that cannot die without the death of the people, of their honor, their civilization and their greatness. Take care that you do not bury too much while burying the dead past; that you do not bury the inspiring memories of great patriots, whose actions, whether successful or not, are the eternal glory of your race and section; the influence of their virtues, the guiding precedents of their histories.¹⁴

The struggle for independence may have been lost, but that did not justify relegating it to obscurity. The Confederates, though vanquished, had provided an example of heroic self-sacrifice which could serve as a model to ensure the continuance of virtue and

¹²Dabney, The New South, 3.

¹³Ibid., 4.

¹⁴Ibid., 20.

civic responsibility. "The New South needs wealth, but it also needs men, high minded men, undebauched by wealth, who like the 'high privates' of the Confederate ranks, shall know how to postpone ease and the delights of culture for the invincible endurance of hardships and danger."¹⁵ On the other hand, denial of the values for which the sectional conflict was fought would eventually lead to spiritual decline and moral decay. Virtue would deteriorate in a world where the Confederate past was rejected.

As long as the hearts of the New South thrill with the generous though defeated endurance of the men of 1861; as long as they cherish these martyrs of constitutional liberty as the glory of their state and its history, you will be safe from any base decadence. If the generation that is to come ever learns to be ashamed of these men because they were overpowered by fate, that will be the moral death of Virginia, a death on which there will wait no resurrection.¹⁶

Dabney's plea for a New South based on veneration of the Old clearly provided the basic tenet of what is today known as the religion of the Lost Cause. As Charles Reagan Wilson has shown, Southerners at the end of the Civil War tried to come to terms with their defeat. They perceived the sectional conflict as the high point of Southern virtue, as a moral struggle against the godless North. Once the South was overcome, ministers like Dabney feared that their people would fail to meet future moral challenges as they had done so heroically in the past. These religious leaders resolved, therefore, to continue the military-political battle by

¹⁵Ibid., 19.

¹⁶Ibid., 20.

creating a civil religion. Thus, the South's traditional religious culture was transformed into a Southern civil religion, based upon a fusion of Christian rhetoric and symbolism with the rhetoric and imagery of the Confederate tradition. In this way, spiritual leaders sought to preserve a cultural identity to replace the separate national identity that had been denied them.¹⁷

Thus, by denouncing the New South's battle cry of progress and prosperity as materialistic and sensualistic, Dabney pitched the struggle for hegemony on a high moral plain. The contest between Bourbons and Whigs was not simply a question of agrarianism or industrialism, but was in fact a mortal clash between the forces of good and evil, part of the age-old fight between the armies of light and darkness, a forked road not merely to economic recovery but to either salvation or damnation. He portrayed the antebellum order as the epitome of virtue and holiness, while he painted the post-war South as a period of immorality and atheism. The latter had spurned the value system of the pre-war "not because the old forms were not good enough for this day, but because they were too good for it." The critique was projected as the voice of righteousness in this moral battle, a defense not of the planter regime but of Christianity in the South. In a society deeply imbued with an evangelical Calvinism which called its members to strict morality

¹⁷ Charles Reagan Wilson, Baptized in Blood: the Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920 (Athens, 1980), 7-8.

and other-worldliness, Dabney knew just where to strike. Playing upon his fellow Southerners' strong religiosity, he urged them to reject the sensuality and decadence of the new age because it was subversive of religion. He warned them that in a world of materialism, where the only concerns were for pleasure and wealth and where knowledge was restricted to the realm of sense experience and observable fact, man would no longer believe in God. Only by recreating the pre-war world could the South ever be morally or spiritually great again.¹⁸

In all of this, Dabney perceived himself as playing no small role. Indeed, he cast himself as a prophet of doom and decay, a Southern Jeremiah sent by God to turn His people away from their sin and back to righteousness. Equating Yankee civilization with Satan, Dabney feared for the souls which Northern doctrines wooed into sin and damnation. His diatribe against modernity was an urgent plea to these transgressors to turn away from their wicked ways while there was still time. "I am the Cassandra of Yankee-dom," he exclaimed, "predestined to prophesy truth and never to be believed . . . until too late."¹⁹

All good prophets chastise the unrighteous by pointing out their evil with one hand while thrusting the other hand toward Heaven. Similarly, Dabney admonished Southerners to turn away from

¹⁸Dabney, The New South, 5; Donald G. Mathews, Religion in the Old South (Chicago, 1977), 61-63.

¹⁹Robert L. Dabney to Thomas Cary Johnson, July 1, 1894, Robert Lewis Dabney Papers, Union Theological Seminary.

heresy and danger, while offering the planter program, one he considered consistent with Christianity. The alternative world he proffered was a revitalization of the old order--as much as irrevocably altered conditions would allow. Social hierarchy, plantation economy and white supremacy, the hallmarks of the Old South, would have to be re-erected if planters were to realize their dream of restoring the ancien regime. Yet, they recognized that a complete return to the pre-war environment was not totally possible. Some facets such as slavery could never be recreated in any absolute sense. Even so, it was within their power to fashion a future South which could retain in almost every particular the characteristics of the old one which they so cherished.

Despite his campaign against material idolatry, Dabney believed that economic development in the South was essential to the restoration of his section as a power in the nation. Only by increasing its wealth could the region's ability to protect itself be rebuilt.²⁰ Yet, the path to rejuvenation he envisioned was not industrial, but agrarian. Accordingly, the first aspect of revitalization would be to restore the plantation to the center of the Southern economy. He derided those who cried to have "like our conquerors great cities, great capitalists, great factories and commerce and great populations. . . ." He denied that "the surest way to retrieve your prosperity is to BECOME LIKE THE CONQUERORS."²¹

²⁰Dabney, The New South, 18.

²¹Ibid., 17.

Dabney was not completely opposed to industry, however, for small-scale manufacturing, of the type which planters wanted, could have its benefits. He admonished the graduates at Hampden-Sydney that "a knowledge, and a hardy, diligent practice of the industries of production are among the civic virtues which it behooves the New South to cultivate."²² Yet, industrialization must be kept limited and subordinate to agriculture. The benefits that would accrue under a balanced economy were only hollow promises, Dabney argued, because they could only come at too great a sacrifice on the part of the common man. Appealing to the small farmer's sense of sovereignty over his life and land, Dabney contended that to industrialize completely would be to destroy the virtue of the Southern people and to endanger their liberty. The giant corporations which would implement large-scale manufacturing would only undermine the domestic and personal independence of the yeomanry, and eventually would drive them off the land in hopelessness. The small farmer would become part of "the multitudinous mass proletariat, dependent on the corporation for his work, his wages, his cottage, his kitchen garden, and the privilege of buying his provisions for his family."²³ The liberty which he had enjoyed in the agricultural community would be completely snuffed out.

Moreover, giant corporations would band together to forge financial oligarchies. The centralization of capital, Dabney

²²Ibid., 18.

²³Ibid., 17.

contended, subverted liberty, created extreme inequalities of wealth, and reduced the "free-holding citizen" to the level of a "hireling proletariat."²⁴ When the American nation was established, he continued, no one city, no one or two states controlled a majority of the wealth, and hence state equality was a reality. But, by the late nineteenth century, New York, the "commercial mistress of all," asserted a financial ascendancy "which brings the business and the welfare of the whole country to her feet."²⁵ Dabney believed that with such conditions, political independence and equality could not long endure. Extreme inequality of fortune, of which New York's "financial despotism" was symptomatic, had deformed American society. The Jeffersonian ideal of an aristocracy based on merit and intelligence, where the richest citizen was only a farmer, had been distorted. With capital amassed in the hands of a few, society would degenerate into an oppressive organization "fully parallel to the worst results of feudalism."²⁶ It was simply a matter of time until the "kings of industry" crushed the vast vestige of republican government. "Political subjugation," he warned, "must, sooner or latter, follow the financial."²⁷ He assured the yeomanry that "with their wealth transferred by confiscations and legislative juggleries to the coffers of Northern

²⁴Ibid., 6.

²⁵Ibid., 7.

²⁶Ibid., 8.

²⁷Ibid., 7.

capitalists, their homesteads dropping into decay, their farms lapsing into barren thickets, their gallant sons reduced to a laboring peasantry," they would "sit under the grim shadow of an unjust poverty, and . . . sink into obscure graves. . . ."28

Industrialization was also to be shunned, because it inevitably led to the evil of urbanization. Dabney agreed with Jefferson that cities were "'but great ulcers upon the body politic.'" They were destructive, he claimed, of man's productivity and industriousness. "These are the human hives," he wrote, "in which these drones are found in needless numbers, consuming but producing no honey." Urban dwellers lived much more luxuriously than those in the country; they consumed unproductively far more of the goods and services created by society than their rural neighbors. Urban disease and pollution claimed the lives of thousands; and to replace those whom it killed, the city steadily drained the countryside to refill the ranks of its businesses. Moreover, Dabney charged, cities were the breeding grounds for political corruption. "The urban population becomes unsafe depositories for political power." Revolutions and demagogues, he warned, always spring forth in a great city.²⁹

Dabney further buttressed his argument by charging that industrialization would sweep other scourges into the South, such as

²⁸Dabney, "George Washington Cable," 152.

²⁹C. R. Vaughn, ed., Discussions by Robert Lewis Dabney, vol. 4 (Mexico, MO., 1890-1897), 326.

protectionism and labor unions. Modernists like Henry Grady insisted that manufacturers would have to be offered favorable laws, if they were ever to be attracted to the South. Already, Whig-industrialists were taking Grady's cue by urging passage of protective legislation as a way of inducing Northern businesses to relocate in their section. Dabney was convinced of their error. He argued that protectionism simply fostered the growth of monopolies, which created an unbalanced economy by violating the law of supply and demand. By insulating monopoly rings and cartels from competition, government forced prices to rise completely out of proportion to demand.³⁰ Furthermore, as factories were constructed, labor unions would naturally be formed. These societies Dabney condemned as nothing more than labor monopolies, as evil as the very trusts which they so vehemently denounced. They, too, violated the law of supply and demand by artificially forcing wage increases, the cost of which employers simply passed along to the consumer. "Their cry," he chided, "is: 'For the masses against the classes!'" Yet they are assisting a narrow class to plunder the masses of their fellow citizens."³¹

The second aspect of Dabney's program of revitalization entailed prevention of social reform. Universal manhood suffrage and free, public-supported schools were basic to the New South creed. Both would provide the political power and education needed

³⁰Ibid., 333.

³¹Ibid., 294-301.

to elevate the lower classes and foster social mobility; they would provide the intelligent, industrious work force considered necessary to attract Northern manufacturing; and they would furnish the leverage needed to break the back of the old planter-aristocracy. Dabney sensed that if the Whig-industrialist challenge were to be thwarted, social reformation of Southern society would have to be stifled. Moreover, the social and racial hierarchies intrinsic to restoration of the old order would be undermined by such reforms. Mass schooling, in particular, by its levelling effect, would wreck what little culture and refinement remained in the new order. The fixed distinction between laboring and leisured classes would be obliterated. "It is one of the most important and best established maxims of social science that influence descends," he sneered; and without a cultivated element at the top of the social pyramid, laborers would either relapse into illiteracy or fall prey to vice and vulgar mass culture. "The result," he concluded, "is that the whole structure tumbles into rubbish."³² Yet, public education and the franchise were two facets of the creed most attractive to the yeomanry and were, therefore, the most challenging for Dabney to defeat. Again, his attack relied upon the Southern people's deeply religious nature, and also, for the first time, upon the issue of white supremacy.

Dabney launched this wave of his assault on the New South utilitarians by condemning their program of social reform as

³²Ibid., 206.

contrary to the laws of God. "It is a favorite proposition with the asserters of these so-called American ideas," he remarked, "that 'every American boy should improve himself as though he might some day be President of the United States.'"³³ Such ideas were dangerous, he felt, for they fostered discontent with the "allotments of Providence and the inevitable graduation of rank, possessions and privileges."³⁴ He considered it obvious that such a philosophy was anti-Christian, in that the Bible by its whole tone "inculcates the opposite spirit of modest contentment with our sphere, and directs the honorable aspirations of the good man to the faithful performance of its duties, rather than to the ambitious purpose to get out of it and above it."³⁵ In other words, God had provided a social hierarchy in which each person's position was divinely mandated; and thus, good and faithful Christians, rather than struggling to rise beyond their station, should instead find happiness in fulfilling the role which God has chosen for them in this life. Any system which denied and attempted to level this traditional social structure Dabney branded "Jacobinical," a flawed doctrine "which teaches that mechanical sameness of function, franchise and privilege in each detail is a right 'inalienable,' 'natural,' and 'self-evident.'"³⁶ The only equality Dabney

³³Ibid., 200.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid., 292.

recognized was that which men shared before God; and any attempt to reduce all to the same level was a violation of Divine fiat, "because God has not made men that way."³⁷

Dabney was disgusted by the idea of mass education and warned the people of its perils. First, state supported schooling, he argued, was anti-Christian "because the state is a secular organization, and education cannot safely be non-Christian; therefore, the state should not usurp the right and function of educating youth, as though it were primary in the matter."³⁸ Since children should be trained in Godly principles and since government cannot do so without violating the constitutional separation of church and state, then education should be the responsibility of the parents. He encouraged them to establish their own private, community schools, based on "the old system of Virginia which was the wise, the true, the consistent system. . . ."³⁹ If they should surrender this sacred obligation to the state, and allow government to "manufacture" their children's character, the result would be disastrous. "Noble races make their governments," he commented; "ignoble ones are made by them."⁴⁰

³⁷Thomas Cary Johnson, Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney (Richmond, 1903), 568.

³⁸Quoted in Ernest Rice Thompson, Presbyterians in the South, vol. 2 (Richmond, 1963), 343.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Vaughn, Discussions by Dabney, 224.

Second, public schools, Dabney contended, were "a fatal communistic error." Education of this sort, as a function of the commonwealth subsidized by taxes, was simply robbery of one body of citizens to reward the non-production of others. In his words, public education was nothing but "confiscation of the property of industrious people for the behalf of lazy ones."⁴¹ Furthermore, universal common schools, Dabney warned, would require "a mixture of the children of the decent and the children of the vile. . . ."⁴² Not only would good, working citizens have their hard-earned wages snatched away, but they would find their children thrown into the company of "moral lepers," that is, blacks. In a very few communities, he observed, where the limited population is homogeneous, "neighborhood schools could be made to include all the white children without any serious injury to the morals of any."⁴³ Yet, such conditions were the exception, not the rule. In the more typically heterogeneous districts of the South, the white youngsters, at an impressionable, "plastic age," would be subjected to the vices and bad manners of their black classmates:

In order to receive the modicum of letters there dispensed, they must be daily brought into personal contact with cutaneous and other diseases, the vermin--(Yes dear reader, it is disgusting! We would spare you if faithfulness permitted; but the foulness belongs to the plan, not to us)--

⁴¹Quoted in Thompson, Presbyterians in the South, 343.

⁴²Vaughn, Discussions by Dabney, 207.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 208.

the obscenity, the profanity, the grovelling sentiments, the violence of the gamins, with which our boasted material civilization teems in its more populous places.⁴⁴

In such an environment, parents would no longer be able to select the proper moral influences for their children. Dabney urged white citizens, therefore, to protest the policy which "claims to make the black equal, socially and politically, to the most respectable whites," not because of "caste-prejudice," but out of the "conscientious demand of the natural right of our children from moral contamination."⁴⁵

But, the most appalling aspect of integrating the children of both races was not merely the danger it posed to white people's values and standards but the threat it generated to the very existence of their race itself. Negro education, Dabney warned, would pave the way for racial amalgamation. If whites should ever accept blacks as educated, the result would be the crumbling away of social barriers and the intermixing of the races, the offspring of which "must be a hybrid race, stamped with all feebleness of the hybrid, and incapable of the career of an independent race."⁴⁶ This, Dabney wailed, "would be the final disaster."⁴⁷

To add fuel to the flame, Dabney charged that the whole idea of miscegenation through the tool of public education was a Yankee

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid., 208-209.

⁴⁶Dabney, A Defense of Virginia, 353.

⁴⁷Vaughn, Discussions by Dabney, 185.

scheme, hatched as a last effort to complete the enslavement and degradation of the Southern people. "The satanic artificers of our subjugation well know the work which they designed to perpetrate: it is to mingle that blood which flowed in the veins of our Washingtons, Lees and Jacksons and which consecrated the battlefields of the Confederacy with this sordid, alien taint, that the bastard stream shall never again throb with independence enough to make a tyrant tremble." The threat, he warned, was real enough; "it is only our pride which hides the danger from our eyes."⁴⁸

Dabney's enemies charged, perhaps justly, that the reverend did not "want the masses of the people, white or black, to be taught by any system. . . ."⁴⁹ Yet, despite their allegation that he belonged to a group of "men who are fully persuaded that four-fifths of the human race were meant simply for the benefit of the other fifth," Dabney hoped to avoid alienating whites of all classes by drawing attention away from the real points in question.⁵⁰ He shrewdly managed to keep his most potent arguments centered not around public schools per se, but around the racial issues that they involved. He succeeded in directing the debate away from the pros and cons of mass education and its advantages and benefits for all people by inflaming passions over black participation in the

⁴⁸Ibid., 185-186.

⁴⁹Richmond Inquirer, May 10, 1876, Ruffner-Dabney Controversy, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

⁵⁰Ibid.

system. In fact, the most alarming aspect of public education, he cried, was not so much its influence upon whites, which was indeed debilitating, but more importantly, that which it had upon the Negro.

Dabney disapproved of the schooling of blacks, an objection which stemmed from his opposition to their enfranchisement.

"Negroes, as a body," he wrote, "are now glaringly unfit for the privilege of voting"; they possessed neither property, knowledge of the meaning of citizenship, nor the constitution to withstand the temptations of demagogues.⁵¹ He castigated politicians who courted the black vote, and urged the yeomanry to demand that political leaders cast off the odious system of universal manhood suffrage the conqueror had imposed on them. He warned that "if it is not undone, it will destroy both American liberty and civilization."⁵² As a remedy, he proposed that the Southern states establish voting qualifications both of property and intelligence. While he admitted that this plan would exclude a great number of lower class whites, as well as the vast majority of blacks, Dabney felt sure that those whites disenfranchised would gladly relinquish the privilege if thereby the Negro could be excluded.⁵³

If blacks were to be deprived of their right to vote, Dabney reasoned, there was simply little need to educate them. Besides,

⁵¹Vaughn, Discussions by Dabney, 178-179.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 178.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 187.

any attempt to do so would fail miserably anyway. The Negro, he noted, is racially immune from education; and what little he could absorb would render him entirely unfit for his "inevitable sphere and destiny--if he is to have any good destiny--manual labor."⁵⁴ Here, then, was the final phase of the revitalization program, and the answer to what Dabney termed the "race problem"--Negro peonage. By depriving blacks of their franchise and by refusing to educate them, Southern planters could create a permanent underclass of black laborers, and thereby resurrect the institution of slavery. Since a constitutional amendment abolished the South's old labor system, Negro peonage would serve as an admirable substitute by maintaining black labor as an integral part of the plantation economy. Dispossessed of political power and with little or no education to enable social mobility, blacks would be coercively tied to the land as sharecroppers, imitating their pre-war status.⁵⁵

Dabney considered the enforced peonage of blacks which planters desired as essential to the survival of the South's traditional way of life and to maintaining racial harmony. "If our civilization is to continue," he observed, "there must be, at the bottom of the social fabric, a class who must work and not read."⁵⁶ Peonage, just as slavery once had done, represented the proper

⁵⁴Ibid., 180.

⁵⁵For a discussion of black peonage in the South see Pete Daniel, The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969 (Urbana, Ill., 1972).

⁵⁶Vaughn, Discussions by Dabney, 185.

relationship between the races. It was a system not only advantageous for whites, but also for blacks, because it would provide the latter with the guidance and paternalism which they had enjoyed under slavery. By dismantling all control exercised by the planters over their slaves, emancipation, Dabney insisted, had ruined blacks as laborers, for to them, "'freedom' means living without work."⁵⁷ Torn from the supervision of a wise master or overseer, the institution of the black family, never strong before the war, was fast fading away. Worst of all, young blacks were growing up "with a restive, surly, insolent spirit towards whites, in the place of that close family affection, feudal loyalty and humble pride in their superiors which had once united masters and servants."⁵⁸ The franchise and free schools, Dabney contended, had aroused in them "foolish and impossible aspirations, which are fated to disappointment"; and their subsequent disillusionment they will surely blame on their "white rivals," once their "kindly protectors." As for whites, Dabney noted that they would not long tolerate "negro impudence." Once they were driven beyond all patience by "intolerable annoyances," and with fears that blacks are "determined to live and not work," a bloody race war could ensue.⁵⁹ Every effort, then, had to be exerted toward keeping the adult blacks at work

⁵⁷Ibid., 180.

⁵⁸Ibid., 183.

⁵⁹Ibid., 183-184.

and in making sure that the young ones learned to do likewise.⁶⁰

With the inclusion of Negro peonage in Dabney's world picture, the New South critique was complete. The Virginia clergyman had countered the utilitarians' rejection of the old order by demonstrating its true value and worth, and indeed, its superiority over the new era. Warning of peril and danger, he had laid bare the empty promises of progress and abundance offered by social and economic reforms. And, he had fashioned for the Bourbons a philosophy whereby they could rationalize and retain hegemony over their world, while enjoying the continuance of all those institutions which had made it uniquely their own. As he had in the Old South, Dabney defended and justified the world which the planters were fashioning in the New. All this he had accomplished by manipulating certain religious and political concepts, by appealing to certain fears and prejudices shared by his people, and by playing upon a certain sentimental, if not romantic, vision of the past. For a man possessed of such great reasoning ability, Dabney had not openly debated with cold, dispassionate logic the advantages and disadvantages of the New South Creed. Instead, he had applied the weapon of emotionalism to convince his section's common people that Bourbonism and tradition were in their best interest.

⁶⁰Ibid., 181.

CHAPTER IV

"HOLD FAST THAT WHICH IS GOOD"

Committed as he was to redeeming the South from its apostasy, Dabney's struggle against the bourgeois revolution continued unabated until the close of the century. When in 1883 his health began to fail and his doctors suggested a climate more salubrious than the hills of central Virginia, Dabney accepted an invitation to fill the Chair of Moral Philosophy and Political Economy at the University of Texas. There, as co-founder of the Austin School of Theology, he continued to train young men to enter the ministry of his church, the work he had performed for so many years at Union.¹ Yet, even the separation of two thousand miles from his native soil and also total blindness near the end of his life could not silence him. If anything, his self-imposed exile made him all the more vocal.² His writings and sermons during the years he spent in Texas reflect a continued attention to secular matters. The distinction between the affairs of this life and those of the next had

¹Henry Alexander White, Southern Presbyterian Leaders (New York, 1911), 391.

²The volume of Dabney's writings remained constant once he moved to Texas. "The Labor Union, the Strike and the Commune" (1891), "The Depression of American Farming Interests" (1890?), and "'Dollar of the Daddies'" (1892) all address the Populist movement in some way. Another defense of slavery, "Economic Effects of the Former Labor System of the Southern United States" (1894), also appeared during this time. Additionally, Dabney penned several poems praising Confederate bravery, including "General T. J. Jackson" (1887) and "The Texas Brigade at the Wilderness" (1890).

never been clearly fixed in Dabney's mind, and the vehement verbal assault he had launched against the New South following Appomattox had not yet run its course. The Populist protest, in particular, appears to have renewed his efforts in defense of the plantation regime. It also seems that by involving himself in the work at the Austin School of Theology, Dabney attempted to recreate in Texas the world he had known and cherished in Virginia. For him, the journey westward was his emigration, the move he had once considered and then decided against in the late 1860s. Isolated from all that physically reminded him of the old order, he sought to cultivate in the Southwest a little piece of the Old Dominion; and by maintaining the ideological war with increased volume, Dabney was perhaps combatting the subconscious fear that he might now be forgotten.

In May of 1897, Dabney, despite his failed eyesight, ventured to Charlotte, North Carolina, as a Texas delegate to the Southern Presbyterian Assembly. His was the honor of opening the services with prayer and of participating in the numerous debates between his fellow churchmen. Present also were many of his former students, who came forward to express their personal affection and gratitude. Even in his last days the old Virginian still possessed the charisma and powerful intellect characteristic of his early career. "Who that looked upon him there," recalled a colleague, "can forget the majestic figure, the flowing locks? . . . As men listened to the reading of the clear exposition, they were convinced that Dr. Dabney's powers of analysis were as strong as in the former days

when he reigned supreme in the class-room at Hampden-Sidney."³

By now, the end was drawing near. The rest of the year Dabney spent in lecturing and preaching throughout the East before returning to his cottage in Victoria, Texas. There, after only a few hours of acute suffering he died on January 3, 1898.⁴ Four days later, the train bearing his body rolled into the station at Farmville, Virginia, as the great Christian warrior returned to take his final rest in the soil he had so ably defended and so dearly loved. He had commanded his sons to bury him in the little cemetery on the grounds of Hampden-Sydney, where for years he had poured himself out in service to his country and God. He had fought with tongue and pen for the whole South, but especially for Virginia, his "mother"; and in fulfillment of his final wish, Dabney, at long last, was coming home.

As the engine pulled to a stop, a delegation of students met the funeral cortege and accompanied it through town and out to the college. There, during the remainder of the morning, Dabney lay in state in the campus church which he had built many years before. Acting as if he were some chieftain slain in a desperate conflict, groups of students took turns standing guard over his body, which was ironically clothed in the Confederate uniform he had worn as a reluctant member of Jackson's staff, and which he had carefully

³White, Southern Presbyterian Leaders, 392.

⁴Ibid.

preserved for just this occasion.⁵ Late that afternoon, the little chapel was filled with friends and admirers who listened while distinguished Presbyterian ministers praised their fallen "Prince of Israel." They thought no honor too great to be paid to one who had done so much for them, for their church, and for their school.

When the last oration was delivered and the closing hymn was sung, the funeral procession solemnly wound its way to the cemetery. There, the benediction was pronounced, and Dabney was committed to the earth. In time, his widow would erect over his grave a simple, but massive, stone. Upon its granite face would be inscribed the scripture that always guided his actions and which clearly reflected the essence of his soul--"Prove all things, hold fast that which is good." This was the maxim which had defined his career and which had compelled him to struggle against the heresy of the New South creed.⁶

But, how successful were Dabney and the Old South men in their ideological war? Was the world order they and the planters fashioned accepted by their region? Assessing the impact of the New South critique is a difficult task at best. The link between ideas and action is never securely forged, and consequently an answer to the question of Dabney's success is not easily discernible. Some

⁵Report of the Memorial Committee, Camp Sterling Price, United Confederate Veterans, January 16, 1898, Robert Lewis Dabney Papers, University of Virginia.

⁶A more detailed description of Dabney's death and funeral can be found in Thomas Cary Johnson, Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney (Richmond, 1903), 525-539.

historians, attempting to provide a response, have pictured Dabney as an opponent of industrial capitalism on a national level, and thus as a sort of Southern Don Quixote tilting against the windmill of American progress. In such a context, they have naturally judged his arguments to have been basically ignored or rejected.⁷ Yet, Dabney had always employed his polemical talents in defense of Virginia, and to a lesser degree the entire South; and with the bitterness he experienced over Confederate defeat, there is little reason to believe that after the war he suddenly shifted his attention away from his own state and section to the larger national scene. Recognizing this, other scholars have more accurately perceived his role as an enemy of Southern, rather than national, modernism. Nevertheless, they have generally dismissed Dabney's critique--what C. Vann Woodward styled "the elaborately reasoned critique of the brave New South"--as largely ineffectual. They have depicted a postbellum South so busy making money that it had little time for pessimistic condemnation of the corrosive influences of Yankee civilization. Their judgment is based on the assumption that the South following the war was dominated by a new industrial middle class committed to the notion of material prosperity.⁸

⁷David H. Overy, "When the Wicked Beareth Rule: a Southern Critique of Industrial America," Journal of Presbyterian History 48 (1970), 130-142.

⁸C. Vann Woodward, Origins of the New South, 1877-1913 (Baton Rouge, 1951), 174.

But, the mere fact that planters, and not industrialists, held control of Southern society is some evidence, in and of itself, that the New South critique was not, indeed could not have been, ignored. Because the South's landed aristocracy continued to dominate politically, socially, and economically, it only follows that it dominated ideologically as well. As Harold D. Woodman has noted, "not only did individual members of the antebellum landed elite (or their descendants) retain their power and influence, they also retained and imposed upon the new South their antebellum pre-bourgeois ideas and attitudes."⁹ "Revising the cultural standards that justified their position in the post-war world they were making," Jonathan Wiener has written, was part of the planters' struggle to recapture their hegemonic status.¹⁰ Their success in overcoming the industrial challenge signalled their attitudes about economic development, race relations and social programs, as well as their interpretation of the past, would be imposed on their section. Planter hegemony, of course, meant that agriculture would be central to the South's economy well into the twentieth century; and while planters did allow, and in some cases even sponsored, industrial development, it was of a limited nature, non-threatening to

⁹Harold D. Woodman, "Economic Reconstruction and the Rise of the New South, 1865-1900" in John B. Boles and Evelyn Thomas Nolen, eds., Interpreting Southern History: Historiographical Essays in Honor of Sanford W. Higginbotham (Baton Rouge, 1987), 270-271.

¹⁰Jonathan M. Wiener, Social Origins of the New South: Alabama, 1860-1885 (Baton Rouge, 1978), 5.

the plantation labor force and usually restricted to the processing of agricultural products.¹¹

Planter hegemony also resulted in a system of racial hierarchy and in Negro peonage. Blacks across the region were coercively forced to remain on plantations as tenants and sharecroppers, providing planters with a readily available source of labor.¹² In time, disfranchisement and racial segregation legally institutionalized black subordination. As David Donald has suggested, once post-war Southerners had reordered their lives and their society, they sought to ensure that their successors would continue their achievements by codifying white supremacy into law, a decision based not merely on raw politics (i.e., overthrowing Republican party power), but also on the desire to perpetuate sharecropping and white racial hegemony.¹³ Additionally, the decidedly inferior nature of Southern public schools further locked blacks (and poor whites) into the new caste system. As late as 1900, no Southern state spent even half as much as the national average of \$21.14 per student; and moreover, the average amount expended on black children

¹¹James C. Cobb, Industrialization and Southern Society, 1877-1984 (Lexington, 1984), 16-17.

¹²Wiener, Social Origins of the New South, 66-73. See also Pete Daniel, The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969 (Urbana, Ill., 1972).

¹³David Herbert Donald, "A Generation of Defeat," in Walter J. Fraser, Jr., and Winfred B. Moore, Jr., eds., From Old South to New: Essays on the Transitional South (Westport, Conn., 1981), 3-20.

was less than half that provided for white children.¹⁴ Failure by Bourbons to fund public schools properly helped to paralyze social mobility and to restrict the educated labor force deemed indispensable in attracting large scale manufacturing.

Planter hegemony also meant that the South would hold its pre-war society and Confederate experience as sacred. Through the religion of the Lost Cause, postbellum Southerners came to see their culture as an enduring entity and their regional values and cultural symbols as holy.¹⁵ The justness of the institution of slavery and the constitutional and moral righteousness of secession and the war for Southern independence became a part of the standard Southern interpretation of the sectional conflict. In all of this, the New South critique played a key role. In fact, the United Confederate Veterans, the organization which controlled the development of the Confederate tradition in the 1890s and into the next century, placed Dabney's Defense of Virginia among the first ten books on its recommended list, reflecting the influence of the clergyman's ideas among his fellow Southerners.¹⁶

Religion, and its centrality in Southern society, more than any other factor ensured that the critique would be heard and

¹⁴ Woodward, Origins of the New South, 398-399.

¹⁵ Charles Reagan Wilson, Baptized in Blood: the Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920 (Athens, 1980), 15.

¹⁶ Gaines M. Foster, Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South (New York, 1987), 117.

accepted. Religion acted as a sort of conduit for the planters' world order, an avenue through which to reach the Southern yeomanry and then to tap their psyche. As a minister in a region where the clergy were the acknowledged leaders, and as the recognized head of his denomination, Dabney had a place in the church from which to wage his ideological war against the New South, a source from which he could disseminate his propaganda to a ready-made audience at his command. The influence of religion in the South developed during the antebellum years as the churches defended slavery and made themselves an integral part of the social fabric. After the war, they went even further, becoming a part of the machinery of social control. They concentrated more on personal morality than on social ills, while affirming, as H. Shelton Smith suggests, black inferiority by defending traditional patterns of white supremacy.¹⁷ Thus, with pulpit, pen and classroom at his disposal, Dabney took advantage of the significance of religion and his position in its organization. Through his Sunday sermons and addresses to religious gatherings, through articles published in popular religious journals, and through the minds of his students (it was estimated that he trained as many as 350 young men for the ministry), Dabney

¹⁷ Joseph H. Fitcher and George L. Maddox, "Religion in the South, Old and New," in Edgar Thompson, ed., The South in Continuity and Change (Durham, 1965), 348-353; Idus Newby, The South: a History (New York, 1978), 324-325; H. Shelton Smith, In His Image But . . . Racism in Southern Religion (Durham, 1972), vii.

spread his gospel of revitalization to a public predisposed to someone of his ecclesiastical stature.¹⁸

Furthermore, the evangelical nature of Southern religion provided Dabney with the model upon which to fashion his Old South message. As noted earlier, Dabney did not rely upon reason and logic to justify planter domination, but upon sheer emotionalism, very similar to the manner in which he and other Southern ministers justified the ways of God to man. As Donald Mathews has suggested, "evangelical preaching rejects the appeal to reason and restricted sensibilities for a direct, psychological assault upon sin and the equally direct, and much more comforting, offer of personal salvation."¹⁹ Dabney's critique, just like a Sunday morning sermon, damned the sin of modernization, offering instead the comforting salvation that only a return to the past could bring.

By using evangelical religion as a medium and a model, Dabney, and those who followed or labored with him, were able to sell the New South critique to their section's yeomanry. In so doing they defended planter domination of their society and provided these elites with an ideology potent enough to ensure the hegemony of agricultural interests until the mid-twentieth century. This is not to say, however, that planters always enjoyed an unchallenged status; for by the 1890s, they faced a menace to

¹⁸David H. Overy, "Robert Lewis Dabney: Apostle of the Old South" (Ph. D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1967), 316.

their control even more dangerous than that posed by the industrialists. The Populist movement threatened to undermine aristocratic domination and, as Wiener has pointed out, to "unmask the oppression which the Old South ideology concealed and justified."²⁰ Agrarian protest, however, like industrialism, failed to breach planter hegemony.²¹ Real modernization, in terms of a balanced economy, urbanization and civil and political equality for all citizens never occurred in the South until the two decades following World War II. The region's traditions, its agrarian values and racial system, its static outlook and anti-democratic spirit, served as a barrier to genuine progress, discouraging investment from outside while stifling development at home.²² Like Dabney, the South seemed determined to "hold fast that which is good," to cling to that which its elites deemed to be in the region's best interest. Not until the plantation regime finally collapsed and the civil rights movement of the 1960s finally abolished Negro peonage did the South become truly modern, truly a "new" South, characterized by all those "Yankee" traits Robert Lewis Dabney so greatly feared.²³

²⁰ Wiener, Social Origins of the New South, 219.

²¹ Woodward has noted that a common tactic during the 1890s was to have a war hero endorse a Bourbon candidate and to "deliver his lecture on 'the last days of the Confederacy,' inviting the country people. . . ." Woodward, Origins of the New South, 158.

²² William H. Nicholls, Southern Tradition and Regional Progress (Chapel Hill, 1960), 157-163.

²³ Gavin Wright, Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War (New York, 1986), 239-274.

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