

4) Mithraites: Mithraism with a background in Persian mysticism, combined sun worship with some of the Christian ideals. The former Mithraic culture appeared in Italy after 67 BC and featured a strong militancy with a keen appeal to combat, physical might, and practical invincibility. Baptisms was sometimes accomplished by having a bull slain on a grating above the candidates with the falling blood consummating the ritual. The concepts of victory and success allowed some early Christians to accept parts of Mithraism into a syncretized form but there is very little about the cult that shows even the smallest vestiges of any Christianity in an overt sense.

Philosophical Ideas

1) Gnosticism

Easily the most important and difficult external challenge of the time, gnosticism had an appeal for those who wanted to know God empirically and be removed from earthly tarnish. It did not have the answer, of course, but it did make the claim. (A chart sketching Gnosticism is on page 61). It flourished in the last half of the second century but its inception may have been in the first century BC and its development in the first century AD is pronounced. Irenaeus (ca. 180) traced the Gnostic heresy to Simon Magus (Acts) but more recent history and the use of the Nag Hammadic texts suggest that the gnostic concepts are much older than that. Prominent gnostics at this time include Menander, purported to have been a miracle worker, demon exorcisor, etc., and the better known teachers Basilides and Valentinus. As with other groups, the gnostic teachers had schools and followings of their own and there is not total agreement among them except for the broader outlines of knowledge. Each teacher developed ideals suited to themselves and kept them "secret" from the others so as to have a good image...something like trade secrets. Many of the gnostic teachings seem crude to us today but in their time they seemed less grotesque than the older pagan ideas and very much refined in terms of the polytheistic theology in ancient Greece and Rome. The ideas are best represented today in the New Age movement and the various theosophic schools of supposed Christian thought.

Remembering that Gnosticism is a multi-phased view of the world, we may think that the key ideas are these