

COMMENTARY

by Peder Anker

"He's got the whole world in his hands; He's got the whole wide world in his hands."

The lyrics of this traditional American spiritual harken back to a medieval image of an omnipotent Jesus holding in his hands the orb, the macrocosm in which we live. And since there is trouble within the orb, it's comforting to know that his hands are there. Earth is in discord since the expulsion of humans from the Garden of Eden, and humans have to work tirelessly to re-establish that lost harmony. The resurrection of Eden, the Gospels say, will one day happen if we prepare our souls and keep laboring.

The inhabitants of the Cape Cod Ark did not believe in this myth. Yet, they tapped into its powerful structure when building their microcosm of what they believed a future harmonious world should look like. Their building was to be like an ideal orb, and they were its spiritual leaders, holding it in their hands. Their name—the New Alchemists—was inspired by alchemical writings of Giordano Bruno (1548–1600) about the reciprocal relationship between a magician's microcosm and the macrocosm of the world. The ideal house should be a microcosm of nature's household, the New Alchemists thought. Their self-sufficient farm was designed to mirror the world's ecosystem as a whole. In the same way that the sun provides Earth with renewable clean energy, wind generators and greenhouse-like windows provided the New Alchemists with the same. Solar-heated fish ponds represented the oceans and provided the residents with fish. Intensive vegetable gardens embodied Earth's biota and grew food for the inhabitants. A compost system mimicked Earth's soil development processes. An elaborate sewage system made sure human excrement circulated, and it did so by providing food for a flock of chickens that represented Earth's many birds. These carefully designed structures integrated the fish ponds, the gardens, the compost, the chickens, and the human dwelling places into one closed entity.

Their chief metaphorical narrative was the biblical story of Noah. It is told that Noah, on God's advice, built an ark to save the human believers, along with a pair of each type of animal on Earth, from a great flood that was going to punish sinful humans. It was a popular story among biologically informed scholars in the 1970s, who predicted ecological doom as a result of sinful capitalism. The New Alchemists' project revolved around the question of how to survive the impending disaster. Their strategy was to do what Noah once did. With the ability to survive in their own ecological ark, they would, after the destructive capitalist floodwaters withdrew, be the founders of a new Eden modeled on their microcosm for what a more responsible, eco-friendly world should look like.

Biologists don't like religion. It makes them think of anti-science creationism and conservative climate deniers. Yet, for all their disdain for the Judeo-Christian heritage, it's still fascinating to see how they, at least in the case of the Ark of Cape Cod, adapted the religious myths they fought against so forcefully in other political arenas.