

I'm in Ohio this week for the biennial "Kallah" of [ALEPH](#), the organizational home of the [Jewish Renewal](#) movement. This has led to an interesting question about the relation of religion and environmentalism.

I'm taking a class given by [Arthur Waskow](#) on what he calls "[eco-Judaism](#)," which is a pretty self-explanatory phrase: Waskow [believes](#) that Jewish theology in general (and Biblical theology in particular) strongly tilts in favor of ecological consciousness.

But I'm taking the class because at this stage, I am somewhat skeptical of the general notion that religion can add much to environmental policy debates.

First, it seems to me that many of the crucial issues of modern environmentalism are not amenable to broad-based moral reasoning and intuition that religion can provide. Religious thinking has little to say about, for example, what is the appropriate amount of particulates that should be in the air, or whether climate change should be tackled by cap-and-trade, or a carbon tax, or command-and-control regulation.

Second, it concerns me to suggest that one cannot be a good Jew/Christian/Muslim/anything else and have a particular position on the environment. The environment is a political issue, and it should be. But that begins to move us toward a political test of religious commitment.

That said, I don't want to reject the notion entirely because it also seems to me that there are good counter-arguments:

1) A lot of the argument about the costs and benefits of environmental policy concerns issues of intergenerational justice. Nowhere does this arise more, of course, than in the discussion of climate change: if you set a high discount rate, that is tantamount to saying that we shouldn't worry about our grandchildren's environment because they will be so rich that they can handle it. But that means making certain kinds of decisions for them, perhaps on the basis of incommensurable things (i.e. we won't spend money now to save Venice, Italy, or Glacier National Park so that our grandchildren can have more money), as well as taking risks with their lives that may turn out to be wrong. That IS the sort of issue that religious thought can deal with productively.

2) Similarly, a lot of environmental policy does deal with lifestyle issues that are amenable to religious analysis. Put another way, economic analysis takes for granted that maximization of consumer preferences is good. Religion doesn't. That's a good thing. Not only does religion provide a way to change people's preferences, but it also serves as a critique of those preferences regardless of whether some economist says that it "maximized

welfare” for people to drive humongous SUVs.

3) Like any good liberal, I’m trained to think reflexively that “religion and politics” don’t mix, but I’m not sure that that’s true as an empirical matter. Both politics and religion are about values: you can’t say that because politics deals with certain values, religion can’t get involved. If, at the end of the day, I conclude that you can’t be a good Jew and be a Republican, that may be uncomfortable, but it might not be any worse (and perhaps a lot better) than saying that if you can’t be a good Jew and a good Republican, then I need to redefine what I mean by Judaism.

So I’m looking forward to hearing what Waskow has to say. He’s a major figure in both religion and politics, and I will be intrigued to see how he deals with these any other subtle issues.