

[David Brooks' column a few days ago](#) makes an interesting case for radical environmentalism — even if Brooks doesn't see the implications of his argument.

Brooks thinks he is writing a paean to Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn:

Those of us in secular America live in a culture that takes the supremacy of individual autonomy as a given. Life is a journey. You choose your own path. You can live in the city or the suburbs, be a Wiccan or a biker.

For the people who shop at [an gourmet Orthodox grocery], the collective covenant with God is the primary reality and obedience to the laws is the primary obligation. They go shopping like the rest of us, but their shopping is minutely governed by an external moral order.

The laws, in this view, make for a decent society. They give structure to everyday life. They infuse everyday acts with spiritual significance. They build community. They regulate desires. They moderate religious zeal, making religion an everyday practical reality.

The laws are gradually internalized through a system of lifelong study, argument and practice. The external laws may seem, at first, like an imposition, but then they become welcome and finally seem like a person's natural way of being.

Leave aside for the moment the shallow invocation of "individual autonomy," which Brooks seems to equate with something akin to "doing what you feel like." And also leave aside the fatuous notion that being Orthodox "moderate[s] religious zeal": you might want to tell that to the victims of famed Orthodox Brooklyn native [Baruch Goldstein](#).

Anyway: if you substitute many of the specifics for dedicated environmentalists, the same principle would apply. Serious environmentalists make profound choices concerning where they live, their modes of transportation, their levels of energy consumption, and of course the foods they eat (organic, local, vegetarian, or all three!). Their shopping, too, is governed by "an external moral order", viz. an attempt to preserve nature and the earth. Serious environmentalists also spend lots of time studying and practicing their beliefs, keeping up to date on ways of lowering their carbon footprint and protecting biodiversity. These activities give their lives constant spiritual significance.

Brooks spends a lot of time bemoaning cultural mores, and seems to take it for granted that

what is required is a return to conservative principles. The reason why he never seems to find reasons to recognize strong moral and cultural values among liberals and the left is an exercise left to the reader.