

Polycentricity and Collective Action in Religious Communities: A Case Study of the Chabad-Lubavitcher Sect

Austrian Student Scholars Conference

Alexis Garretson

Polycentric institutions are defined as systems of many decision centers having limited and autonomous rights, yet operating under an overarching, unified set of rules (Aligica and Tarko 2012). Religious polycentric systems are notoriously understudied, yet unique as they address both tangible and intangible club-goods as well as the collective action problems inherent in religious communities. The Chabad-Lubavitcher Sect of orthodox Judaism is an instructive, and understudied, case study of a polycentric civil and religious legal institution. The Chabad sect represents a particularly useful case study as Chabad has particularly porous borders because of the emphasis on outreach and the integration of *baalei teshuva*, or adult non-observant Jews joining or re-joining observance. Additionally, their former spiritual leader (or *rebbe*), Menachem Mendel Schneerson, was never replaced after his death in 1994. Since most Hasidic sects work from the *rebbe* down, this shift in leadership offers a case study of a uniquely polycentric Hasidic community. Thus, this paper provides an institutionalist description, grounded in Bloomington Institutional Analysis, of the governance of the Chabad-Lubavitcher sect, including an extended analysis of the religious law system (*halakha*). Additionally, this paper utilizes the framework developed by Aligica and Tarko (2012) to identify potential vulnerable points and discusses the formal and informal norms that address the potentially vulnerable aspects of the community.