Chapter Fourteen

Leadership and Mysticism:
Gustaf Gisselkors, Jacob Kärmäki, and the Final Stages of Ostrobothnian Separatism

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Separatism, a radical branch of Pietism, made a lasting mark on the spiritual life of Ostrobothnia, a region on the west coast of Finland with lively commercial and cultural ties to Stockholm, the Swedish capital. The early stages of the Separatist movement in the 1730s and the 1740s have attracted some scholarly attention in Finland, whereas the gradual waning of Separatism and the closing stages of the movement have been more or less neglected. During the heyday of Separatism the number of people at the helm of the movement was relatively large compared to the number of actual rank-and-file members. However, when the years passed by, the top echelons of the movement were depleted and the final years of Separatist history are shrouded in an almost impenetrable silence. In order to understand the dynamics that led to the demise of Separatism, I will apply two key concepts, namely mysticism and transfer of leadership, in an approach that borrows the mode of analysis from a different field of research. Conceptual tools borrowed from studies on Chassidism and Jewish mysticism lend themselves to the study of Separatism, even though the religious settings are completely different. Temporal and geographical as well as sociological affinities between the various branches of Chassidism and Separatism are, however, a tempting basis for testing the conceptual tools. Both Chassidism and Separatism flourished during the eighteenth century in the peripheral regions of Eastern and Northeastern Europe. The movements attracted followers who looked up to leaders with a reputation of being mystics. Chassidism and Separatism also faced similar opponents: traditional religious establishments and new intellectual elites. In contrast to the Chassidic and Separatist brands of mystical popular religion, the intellectual elites of the era turned to Enlightenment philosophy and a rationalist worldview.

In the following, I will concentrate my analysis on two Ostrobothnian Separatist leaders, Gustaf Gisselkors and Jacob Kärmäki. For a fuller
Leadership within Chassidism and other religious movements

One of the key concepts for this study is the transfer of leadership. Studies on Finnish revivalist movements have generally focused on the activities of individual revivalist leaders, whose lives and deeds have been studied as hermetic totalities without taking into account the dynamics of succession and the rise of the next prominent leaders. In order to gain a new perspective on Ostrobothnian Separatism I have chosen to use a comparative approach, which takes into account how religious authority has been transferred in other contexts. Chassidism, a Jewish movement striving for religious renewal in eighteenth century Eastern Europe, offers some interesting points of comparison. Chassidism paved the way for a new form of religious leadership: the mystical, pious, and popular leaders challenged the learned, wealthy, and aristocratic traditional leaders. Chassidism brought about a dramatic change in the concept of religious leadership. Chassidic leadership was based on mystical prowess. How was leadership transferred from one person to another within Chassidism? Avrum Ehrlich presents in his analysis of the Chabad movement some Chassidic ways of handling a situation where a new leader was to replace a previous one. In this context I do not concentrate on the ritual ways of transferring authority mentioned by Ehrlich. Instead, I focus on the potential candidates for leadership. According to the Chassidic authorities quoted by Ehrlich, leadership could be passed on from father to son or from master to disciple, the main point being that the new leader should be a qualified mystic.

Within Christianity the transfer of leadership has often taken place through methods different from those used within Chassidism. There are, however, instances where leadership has been transferred from master to disciple. Spener and Francke constitute a prominent example of a pietistic chain of masters and disciples. In some instances leadership could be transferred from father to son. Anders Achrenius succeeded his

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2 Ehrlich, *Leadership in the HaBaD Movement* (see above, n. 1), pp. 32–33.