"Who ya gonna call?": Ministers and the Mediation of Ghostly Threat in Danish Legend Tradition

Author(s): Timothy R. Tangherlini
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Few cultures conceive of ghosts as a predominantly positive force and, quite to the contrary, legends about ghosts usually emphasize the threat that the return of the dead poses to the community (Klintberg 1968; Thomas 1971; Pentikäinen 1968 and 1969). In most communities, while the dead are mourned, there is still an underlying hope that, once dead, they will not only remain dead but also in the grave. When the dead do reappear, people usually call on the services of a particular community member to mediate this intrusion. If legend tradition is any indication, in late nineteenth-century Denmark, the appearance of ghosts and revenants frequently sent people running for ministers. Interestingly, these ministers were not always successful in their dealings with the undead. Unsuccessful mediations of ghostly threat and appeals to other, less institutionally powerful mediating figures such as deacons, students, folk healers and beggars may be related to the reevaluation of the social, political and religious power of the Lutheran church in late nineteenth-century Denmark.

Ghost stories comprise a significant proportion of the legends in Evald Tang Kristensen's late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century collections of Danish folklore (Rockwell 1981). In the two series of published legends, for instance, one finds approximately 3,253 legends that focus primarily on ghosts, representing nearly 16% of the total published legend collection (Kristensen 1892-1901[1980]; and 1928-1936). Since ghosts also
appear in a significant number of the remaining accounts in both the published and unpublished collections, it is nearly impossible to provide an exact count of all legends in which ghosts appear. Contributing to this problem, one finds numerous terms for ghosts in Danish tradition, the two most common being spøgelse (spook or ghost) and genganger (revenant). Other terms, which occasionally allude to the negative conceptions of these beings, include spøgeri (haunting), genfærd (revenant), skidteri (trash), and djævelskab (devilishness). There is considerable terminological fluidity in Danish tradition, and the choice of term seems to be more a matter of individual vocabulary than an elaborate emic taxonomy.

What is most fascinating about ghost stories is not simply the apparition of the ghost, but rather how people react to it. Although many stories simply recount the appearance of a visitation from beyond the grave, more elaborate stories center on reactions to the appearance of the ghost, and the success or failure of those who try to stave off the threat. In many cases, people try to counteract the ghostly presence themselves. For example, A. C. Nielsen recounts the following:


[There’s quite a bit to tell about Jørgen Lykke, the manor lord at Bunderup (the present-day Lerkenfeldt). He couldn’t agree with Bjørn Andersen, who lived at that time at Bjørnsholm. Once when Jørgen Lykke was going to build a new barn, he had it built directly across the road that Bjørn usually used when he traveled south. A little later, Bjørn died, but then he continued to use the road after his death and one night he went through the barn so it was thoroughly demolished. Jørgen Lykke now advised his people that they should keep a watch out at night and shoot at the revenant if it appeared again. Bjørn came the same way again, and everything that was done to stop it was fruitless. So Jørgen Lykke finally had to move his...]


barn away from the road.]

Although people occasionally succeed in defeating the ghost without any outside aid, they quite frequently fail. Sometimes, the person confronted with the ghost does not attempt to thwart it alone, but rather appeals for help to a community figure considered to be capable in such matters. This type of entreaty appears in approximately 327 legends in the first series of Kristensen's published legend collection, or a little less than 15% of the corpus. The type of individual chosen to mediate the threat is one based on the narrator's conceptions of social organization, conceptions that are likely informed by contemporaneous social and political developments. The success or failure of the mediation can be seen, in turn, as a narratorial evaluation not only of the individual mediator, but also of the office that he or she holds in society. An examination of both reactions to ghostly threat and the efficacy of those reactions reveals that tradition-participants use legends strategically to celebrate certain mediators or classes of mediators and to criticize others.

The identity of the mediator in a particular legend should be considered in the context of narrative choice. Narrative choice occurs at multiple junctions in the course of legend narration (Tangherlini 1995:5-6; Tangherlini 1998). Performance context itself is one governed by the concept of choice: the narrator chooses to tell a story; then chooses to tell a legend; then chooses to tell a ghost story and then chooses to tell a particular ghost story. Each of these choices is affected both by the cultural context as well as the situational context of the specific performance. Internal to the tale, the narrator also makes numerous choices. A short structural map of the legend genre delineates these areas of narrative choice within the tale and illustrates how these choices can function as an endorsement of an ideological position.

W. F. H. Nicolaisen's modification of William Labov and Joshua Weletzky's structural model breaks legend into three main parts: orientation, complicating action, and resolution (Labov and Weletzky 1967; Nicolaisen 1985). Each of these parts can be seen as a locus of narrative choice. Analyzing legends according to this simple scheme allows one to develop a significant understanding of areas of perceived threat, manifestations of that threat, and responses to it. In the orientation, the narrator chooses the community under threat—most often his or her own—and situates the account both geographically and historically. A story told about an event at a nearby location in the recent past, for example, offers the potential for the expression of a more immediate threat than one consigned to the hoary past or to distant locales. In the complicating action, the narrator
chooses not only how the threat is manifest but also what or who is threatened. Furthermore, the narrator details the reaction to that threat. In the resolution, the narrator provides an evaluation of the interaction. The positive or negative resolution of the interaction, in turn, reveals an ideological evaluation of the efficacy of particular interventions.

In the Danish legend tradition, the most frequent mediators of contact with ghosts are the præst or parish minister, the provst or dean, the kapellan or curate, the degn or deacon/parish clerk, the student, the beggar, and the klog mand or folk healer. Generally, they are called to counteract the threatening appearance of either guilty haunts, disturbers or, occasionally, avengers. The most frequent intervention on the part of the mediator is to conjure (at mane or at nedmance) the haunt back into the earth; sometimes, a post or a stake is driven into the ground above the conjured revenant to prevent further haunting. Nanna Reedtz tells one such story of a minister who succeeds in conjuring a revenant:

På herregården Kalvø boede en gang en forpagter, der druknede ved slotspladsen; men da han havde begået mange uretfærdigheder mod bønnerne, kunde han ingen ro få i graven, men såes om natten i de værelser, han havde beboet, i skikkelse af en sort hund, som man aldrig kunde fange. Den gl. præst i Torsager i forning med ham i Todbjærg mødte de derfor en aften ved kirkegården for at mane forpagteren, hvilket først lykkedes dem efter megen læsen. Præstens kusk, som holdt et stykke derfra med vognen, så tydeligt, hvorledes forpagteren sank, eftersom præsten læste. Der blev slået en pæl ned over ham og den står på en eng ved kirkegården. Endnu tør bønderne, når de slår græs på engen, ikke afmeje det græs, der står nærmest ved pælen, for at han ikke skal komme igjen. På kirkegården ligger en ligsten over forpagterens grav (Kristensen 1892-1901[1980], 5:137).

[A tenant farmer once lived at the manor farm Kalvø, and he drowned by the castle courtyard. He’d committed all sorts of injustices against the peasants, and so he couldn’t get any peace in his grave. He was seen at night in the rooms that he’d occupied in the shape of a black dog that no one could ever catch. The old minister in Torsager along with the one over in Todbjærg met one night in the cemetery to conjure the tenant farmer. They finally succeeded after a great deal of reading. The minister’s driver, who was waiting a little ways away with the wagon, clearly saw how the tenant farmer sank as the minister read. They hammered a post down over him and it stands in a meadow near the cemetery. Even now, the peasants,
when they cut the grass on the meadow, don’t dare to cut the grass closest to the post, so that he won’t come again. In the cemetery, there’s a gravestone over the tenant farmer’s grave.]

The ghost is at first difficult to conjure, but the two ministers eventually succeed and, as long as the post remains undisturbed, the ghost will be kept at bay.

It is rather surprising, at first blush, that ministers and other representatives of the Lutheran church are so often called on to confront ghosts in legends, since the belief in ghosts in nineteenth-century Denmark runs directly counter to Lutheran notions of salvation, heaven, and hell (Thomas 1971; Johansen 1995). Indeed, the debate over the Catholic concept of Purgatory, and hence the existence of ghosts, was quite heated in post-Reformation Europe (Thomas 1971:588; Brown 1979:15-23; Bennett 1986:6-7; Johansen 1995:188). In Denmark, the outright rejection of the concept of Purgatory resulted in the banning of vigils (Johansen 1995:181). If the Lutheran Church had as much power as implied by its close alliance with the strong Danish crown, one would have expected that policies such as this eventually would have influenced tradition-participants’ beliefs, thereby lessening the apparently wide-spread belief in ghosts (Grell 1995:5; Koch and Kornerup 1954:351; Johansen 1995:181).

The number of ghost stories found in Tang Kristensen’s legend collections countermands this expectation and perhaps lends credence to Jean Delumeau’s argument that Christianity only reached the peasant class in a “folklorized” form (Delumeau 1977:166-68).7 Jens Christian Johansen refutes Delumeau’s position and notes that the “Lutheran faith fused so firmly with traditional magical peasant beliefs that they [were] nearly impossible to separate” (Johansen 1995:187), rejecting the notion that, “the peasants should have been so split in their beliefs that they simultaneously worshipped within two different sets of beliefs—a primitive popular one during weekdays and a Christian one on Sundays” (Johansen 1995:187).8 Instead, he supports Pleijel’s (1970) suggestion of a complexio oppositorum to describe the folk reconciliation of this seeming contradiction, namely a nearly universal adherence to Lutheranism coupled with a clearly non-Lutheran belief in ghosts.9 Indeed, it is likely that the common belief in ghosts was little affected by the advent of Lutheranism. Since early Reformation ministers were drawn from the ranks of both the peasantry and the earlier Catholic clergy, the general population and the clergy came to share certain beliefs that ran counter to Lutheran theology, including a belief in ghosts (Johansen 1995:187).

Ultimately, the concept of purgatory and, by extension, beliefs in
ghosts, came to be considered by Lutheran theologians as the work of the Devil (Bennett 1986:6; Johansen 1995:182-83). This ecclesiastical position eventually informed folk tradition, as attested by the surprising overlap of motifs between ghost and Devil legends. Perhaps the clearest examples of this alliance between ghosts and the Devil are legends in which the minister forces a ghost to act as the fourth wheel of his cart:

I Spentrup var og en præst, som var dygtig til at mane. En aften var han kjørt ud til et hus, hvor han skulde mane et spøgelse. Han kjørte alt hvad han kunde, indtil vognen blev så tung, at hestene ikke kunde trække den, han stod da efter præstens ordre af og lagde det ene hjul i vognen. Nu gik det godt, indtil de kom ganske nær til hjemmet, men så gik karlen hen og satte hjulet på igjen. Det var for tidlig, ti da de kom i præstegården mærkede præsten, at det var galt fat, og sagde til karlen, at nu skulde han skynde sig at få hestene i stalden og så ikke komme ud derfra, før han kaldte på ham. Men karlen var nysgerrig og kikkede ud, og da var der noget fældt skid- teri, der væltede laden, idet det foer bort, men med præsten fik det ingen magt (Kristensen 1892-1901[1980], 5:195).

[In Spentrup there was also a minister who was quite good at conjuring. One night, he drove out to a house where he was going to conjure a ghost. He drove as fast as he could until the wagon got so heavy that the horses could no longer pull it. He (the farmhand) got down, according to the minister’s orders, and put one of the wheels into the wagon. Now it went well until they got close to home, and then the farmhand went and put the wheel on again. It was too early since, when they got to the parsonage, the minister noticed that something was wrong. He told the farmhand that he should hurry up and get the horses into the stable and not come out until he called to him. But the farmhand was curious and looked out, and there was some nasty trash that tipped the barn, before it took off, but it didn’t get power over the minister.]

In the legend, the ghost appears as a motifemic equivalent of the Devil in legends cataloged by Christiansen as ML 3010, “Making the Devil Carry the Cart” (Christiansen 1958:22-23). Terms for ghosts, such as “djævelri” further attest to this close relationship. By the time of Tang Kristensen’s collecting, the belief in ghosts had been made more or less theologically sound by the syncretic connection drawn between ghosts and Satan (Bennett 1986:6-9). One can speculate that this demonic affiliation made the ghost an even more terrifying figure in folk belief, as noted by Bennett: “The ghost in fact had not been eliminated from the Protestant
mind, merely transformed into a creature even more frightful” (Bennett 1986:10). Rather than being simply an apparition from beyond the grave (or purgatory as in Catholic teaching), the ghost appears as a manifestation of unmitigated evil requiring immediate and powerful spiritual intervention. And who better to provide this service than the local minister? Now, instead of engaging in a theologically unsound battle with a ghost, the minister who confronts the apparition could be seen as bravely confronting Satan. The minister thereby sidesteps the theologically difficult position of conjuring a ghost.

Interestingly, one does find an occasional legend in which a Lutheran minister refuses to have anything to do with conjuring the ghost, as in a story told by Tomas K. Nielsen:


[There was an old woman here in Saltum parish, in a town they call Rendbæk. She was cared for by the parish. And so she came to a place where they’d had similar old people, and she died there. But now people began to talk about how she haunted, I can’t remember if they saw her, but they could smell her—there was this horrible smell in the house at night, so that they couldn’t stay there. And so they got one of their sons to come back to the house to stay, but the smell was just as bad, and he had to have a drink so that he wouldn’t get sick from the smell. So they went to consult the parish minister, but he wouldn’t have anything to do with it. Then they went over to the Jetsmark minister, Lund, and he followed them home and did something so that the revenant stayed away, and since then they didn’t notice the smell anymore. But he told them that one of their heads of cattle would die, she’d take that with her. And a short time later a
grey steer died there.]

Accounts such as this, however, are so few in number that they do not seem to reflect general folk belief.\textsuperscript{10} In fact, even these legends support the belief that ministers could successfully intercede in such situations, since the minister was sought out in the first place. In all of the stories, after the initial refusal of one minister, another minister is found who can finish the job. While the initial refusal could be interpreted as a reflection of the minister’s theological sophistication, it is unlikely that most story-tellers or audiences would interpret the refusal in this manner—it is more likely that they would interpret the refusal as a form of weakness.\textsuperscript{11}

In rural Danish villages, the local minister was the representative of the Lutheran church and, by extension, the Christian god. One of his primary duties was to protect the spiritual integrity of the community and to alert parishioners to the constant threat of Satan. He also presided over daily services and, most important in the context of ghost stories, ritual events, such as funerals, where the dead are put into the ground, presumably to stay. Because of a reform in the University of Copenhagen’s constitution in 1621, aspiring ministers were required to study two to three years at the university. Accordingly, by the mid-seventeenth century, ministers, unlike the majority of their parishioners, were reasonably well educated (Johansen 1995:188; Glebe-Møller 1980:152-56). And, by the late nineteenth century, most ministers came from communities other than the ones they served (Elvius 1885-1887). Consequently, ministers came to be seen as both powerful and apart.

The minister’s power was not solely limited to the spiritual realm. In most rural communities, the minister not only presided over matters of the church, but also sat on local governance boards and frequently ran the local schools (Scocozza and Jensen 1994:203). The connection between the church and education was remarkably close (Koch 1949:105). Furthermore, parish records were used to keep track of the population not only for the church but for the government as well. Until the promulgation of the democratic Constitution in 1849 that guaranteed the separation of Church and State, the minister functioned as more than simply a religious figure; he was also a major player in community politics and among the clearest representatives of the distant government in Copenhagen, as noted by Ole Peter Grell: “[The] Lutheran Church in Denmark...was a church fully controlled by the crown, where the ministers and superintendents/bishops were loyal servants of the government, swearing allegiance to the king” (Grell 1995:5).

Two of the other frequent mediating figures in Danish ghost stories, the
kapellan or curate and the provst or dean, occupied professional roles nearly equivalent to that of the minister. In some parishes, there was more than one church and, in these cases, the provst was the primary minister for the entire parish. As such, he had a somewhat higher position than the normal minister in the church hierarchy. Conversely, the kapellan occupied a slightly lower rung than the normal minister in this hierarchy, acting as an assistant minister in larger parishes. This concept of church hierarchy—and the attendant potential for power struggles—informs the mediated ghost stories to a remarkable degree, with conjuring abilities at times tied directly to status and, at other times, inversely related to status.

Neither of the two other frequently mentioned mediators, the degn or deacon/parish clerk and the student, is an ordained minister. Each one represents a consecutively lower rung on the educational ladder, and only the degn truly figures into the context of the local church hierarchy. The degn was usually someone who had completed some formal theological training, but had not been ordained as a minister. Most degn worked as parish clerks or assistants to ministers, and the legend tradition attests to a lively power struggle among the degn and their superiors. The student was even more disenfranchised than the degn. Commonly in legend tradition, the student had not completed his largely theological training and thus, while educated and literate, lacked the institutional legitimation of his clerical counterparts. The student’s success in mediating ghostly threat, usually in cases where ministers or other clergy failed, accordingly stands as a direct challenge both to the church’s institutional claim to spiritual authority and to the abilities of those charged with the spiritual protection of a particular community. Jens Beg’s widow tells a legend in which a student succeeds in conjuring a revenant after no fewer than eight ministers have failed:

gravsten blev tagen opp af Uldbjærg kirkegulv og derefter lagt ud tillige med hende selv på kirkegården (Kristensen 1892-1901[1980], 5:161).

[There was an old lady at Ulstrup, a little ways to the north here... After a while she dies and begins to haunt (goes again). And they were in a bad way, because nobody could stay at the farm at night because of her. So they gathered nine ministers together, and among them was a student. He sat down next to the wood-burning stove, while the others sat down at the table. Late that night she came, too. When she came in, she said, “Yes, there are nine of you, but if there were nine more of you, you wouldn’t be able to do anything to me, except for that little buffoon, sitting there next to the stove.” Then the student took a little book up out of his pocket and hit her on her mouth and said, “You should be ashamed of yourself. Come with me now.” Then she had to follow him out and he conjured her down there. After that day, they could stay in the farm. It isn’t too long ago that her gravestone was taken up from the floor of Uldbjærg church and lain, along with her, out in the cemetery.]

Here, the student’s success acts as a refutation of the power of the ministers and the church, as well as a simultaneous endorsement of the power of the otherwise disenfranchised student.

The final frequently-mentioned mediating figure in Danish ghost stories is the klogmand or folk healer. The folk healer occupied an even less legitimate position than the student. Functioning in a role reminiscent of a shaman, the folk healer cured villagers’ ailments, removed curses, revealed the identity of thieves and witches, and helped to thwart the potentially destructive consequences of contact with the supernatural. Just as with the minister, the folk healer was attributed some form of spiritual power and was also said to possess a mystical book with supernatural qualities—in Denmark, the book, bound in black like the Bible, was known as the Cyprianus. Unlike the minister, however, the folk healer was completely without any political power or governmental authority. Reviled by some as quacks and charlatans, and suspected by others of unholy alliances with the Devil, many folk healers were destitute, solitary figures. Frequently, the folk healer was a character at odds with both the church and established authority figures in the community. Nevertheless, folk healers did benefit from local grassroots support. As Grell mentions, “The Lutheran clergy...encountered fierce opposition in...their attempts to suppress ‘cunning folk’, not least because these people represented the population’s only access to healing” (Grell 1995:11). Ultimately, one
finds an intriguing situation in the Danish mediated ghost story tradition, with several similar yet at times conflicting figures substituted with surprising ease into the motifemic slot of mediator of ghostly threats.\textsuperscript{12}

Explanations for the narratorial choice of a particular mediator should be sought among the tradition-participants (Tangherlini 1994:148-49). With these ghost stories, it appears that, while some community members clearly endorsed the minister, and all that the position of minister represented, others clearly did not. Ethnographies occasionally paint a picture of surprising ideological consistency within groups, yet this is rarely, if ever, the actual case. Rather, community values, beliefs, and norms are usually in a constant state of development, and the control and direction of the discourse surrounding the development of this ideology can be hotly contested. One of the main arenas for this struggle is narrative tradition, and believable tales such as legends are among the most important rhetorical weapons. While one or two negative stories will rarely erode the power of a well-placed individual, a continuous salvo of repeated tellings can have significant impact—the stories sway public opinion and either damage or reinforce the public image of a particular person and, just as importantly, his office (Tangherlini 1995:7-9). Of course, counter stories—both positive and negative—often defuse the impact of these narrative assaults. It is in the context of this narrative battle concerning cultural ideology that the similar yet opposing roles of these mediators can best be understood.

In the late nineteenth century, Denmark was in a state of political and cultural flux. Earlier in the century, after a catastrophic alliance with Napoleon, the Danish state had been forced into bankruptcy (Scocozza and Jensen 1994:196-203). Cracks appeared in the armor of the absolute monarchy and, in 1848, it was abolished (Scocozza and Jensen 1994:227). In 1849, the democratic Constitution was promulgated and among its numerous far-reaching changes to political structures was the clear separation of church and state, a reaction to increasing demands for religious freedom (Koch 1949:171-72). With the Constitution, the previously close connection between the state and the hundreds of ministers scattered throughout the country who acted as representatives of the government was dissolved. The Lutheran church itself became divided along theological fissures, with various movements, such as the conservative “Indre Mission” (Home Mission) and the more liberal “Grundtvigianer” vying alongside the “Folkekirke” for adherents (Koch 1949:171-205). Concomitant to these developments in the role of the Lutheran church in Danish political life, one finds an increasing political sophistication among the rural pop-
ulations. The Constitution brought with it land reform which led to profound changes in the social organization of the rural areas. By the end of the nineteenth century, the farm-owning class was politically powerful, the cooperative movement was in full swing, and the cotters were beginning to develop into a political block themselves.\(^8\)

The modern breakthrough, ushered in by Georg Brandes’ lectures at the University of Copenhagen in 1871, promoted the ideas of a forward-looking and free society, ideas which reached the rural areas through the wide-spread folk highschool system. By the time Tang Kristensen set off on his fieldtrips into the Jutish countryside and collected the ghost stories found in his collections, rural society was significantly different from what it had been at the start of the nineteenth century, and it was changing dramatically with each passing year. Land ownership was no longer concentrated in the hands of the few, political power was not the sole domain of the crown, the role of women in society was a matter of lively debate, and the minister’s previously powerful position of local control was subject to challenge. In many communities, one often found protracted battles over both the theological path the parish should follow as well as who should fill the position of local minister. In the ghost stories Kristensen collected, one finds a reflection of these battles over the power and theological orientation of the church as well as the abilities of local ministers. Legends that recount incidents where ministers fail to counteract the threat of a ghost seriously question the power of the church itself. Stories where a local minister fails only to have a minister from a neighboring community succeed may reflect the ongoing struggle over the religious direction of local parishes. That people do not seek ministerial assistance in more than 80% of the ghost stories, despite the apparent connection between ghosts and Satan, further suggests the erosion of ministerial power in late nineteenth-century Denmark.

Examining both the choice of mediators and the outcomes of these encounters clearly reveals this challenge to the power of the church. Negatively resolved legends account for approximately 17.5% of all the mediated ghost legends. The failed mediator in nearly all of these accounts (95%) is a minister. Dorte Kristiansdatter narrates one such story: “En klokker ved Ribe domkirke havde været præst, men fik så meget ved en nedmaning, at han ikke kunde dele vin og brød ud, og så blev han klokker” [A bell ringer at Ribe cathedral had been a minister, but he suffered so much during a conjuring, that he couldn’t pass out wine and bread, so he became a bell ringer] (Kristensen 1892-1901[1980], 5:200). In this story, the minister’s inability to conjure the spirit results in a
demotion to the position of bell ringer, a humiliating position for the previously powerful minister.

In the few legends where someone other than a minister fails, that person has usually been called to step in and assist where a minister had initially failed as, for example, in a legend told by Laust Jensen:


[Else Nister couldn’t agree with her pension provider. She used a little piece of land that, after her death, was supposed to revert to the owner. But she wanted to prevent this....A few nights later, she was in the farm and sent a message to the minister asking if he wanted to come out to her or whether she should go in to him. He didn’t let her ask more than once and when he came out, she got hold of him and roughed him up quite badly. The minister’s carriage immediately set off to Grindsted for the deacon. My father knew the farmhand well who drove that night. He had to go twice, because the first time the deacon didn’t want to go. But when he came the second time, he let himself be convinced by his wife to go along. Before they got to the parsonage, they could hear the minister screaming, and it sounded like it was going to be his last moments. The deacon found both Else Nister and the minister inside an oven, and she was tormenting him in there. But the deacon got her out, and a long
fight for her ensued. Nobody knows what words were exchanged, but after a while, the deacon set off with the revenant down along Kirkesig, and she was conjured down there. Many years ago, I saw the post that was driven down over her. My father knew the deacon really well and said that, since that time, he just wandered about and wasn’t able to do anything.

In this case, the _degn_ is able to save the minister, but suffers debilitating consequences from interacting with the ghost. Neither the minister nor the _degn_ is shown to be particularly competent, and the story, like all of the negatively resolved mediated ghost legends, stands as a direct challenge not only to the power of the particular minister, but also to the office of the minister and, by extension, the Lutheran church.

Legends with an ambiguous resolution, constituting 21% of the corpus of mediated legends, also call into question the power of the local minister. In these stories, although the ghost is repelled or conjured, the threat of its return hangs heavy over the community. In a legend told by A. C. Nielsen, the ghost is conjured, but the minister is forced to grant it certain concessions, allowing it to continue its haunting:


[A girl worked at a farm in Han district once, and she got preg-
nant by the farmer and became mother to a child that she killed immediately after she’d given birth. A little later, both the farmer and the girl died, and the infanticide hadn’t been discovered yet. Then the girl got no peace in her grave, and went again every night. Yeah, she was even so powerful that she could show herself before sundown. In particular, there was a frightening disturbance near the doghouse, where she supposedly buried the baby’s corpse at first, and later in the pig sty, where it was supposedly buried next. And no one could get through the door in the evening or at night where the ghost walked. But there was a girl at the farm who’d known the deceased, and one time, when the ghost showed herself quite clearly, she talked to it with these words: “Shall I not help you in the name of Jesus Christ?”—“No, no,” it growled and turned threateningly toward her, at which point it continued its walk. But the girl lost her mind and became a poor little creature until she died. The widow, who lived at the farm, decided to sell it, since she felt it had gotten too bad. But before that happened, a curate came to the parish and he conjured the revenant away from the farm. But it was allowed to keep a little round patch out in the field as big as the bottom of a barrel—the curate didn’t have enough power for anything else. Nothing can grow on that place and the ghost still walks there.

The serving girl’s attempts to mediate the intrusion on her own fail horribly, and the curate’s subsequent intervention is only incrementally better, since the revenant is allowed to continue to haunt. Indeed, the narrator makes specific reference to the curate’s lack of power.

In several of the ambiguously resolved legends, one finds mediators other than ministers who are unsuccessful in their attempts to conjure the ghost. In one legend, a folk healer successfully conjures a ghost but, because a farmhand watches—and thus clearly violates a common interdiction against witnessing a conjuring—the folk healer suffers a debilitating injury:

hele sin levetid (Kristensen 1892-1901[1980], 5:193).

[There used to be terrible haunting at Tvilum farm. When the farmhands came home from a dance at night, they were almost always confronted by a headless bull. So they went and got a folk healer who was supposed to conjure the bull down. He asked that nobody watch him because then there'd be problems. So he was alone with the bull. One of the farmhands couldn't stop himself from looking in through a crack in the door, and he saw that the bull gored the man's thigh. He quickly shouted, "Now there are other eyes than mine that see." Then the farmhand pulled his head back and the man managed to get the better of the revenant; but when he came out, he limped and he continued to do so for the rest of his life.]

The motif of a farmhand witnessing the conjuring is common, but in most of these variants the conjurer is a minister. This variant not only foregrounds the debate over who one should call to counter the threat of a ghostly intrusion, but also lends support to the hypothesized motifemic equivalence of folk healers and ministers. As with negatively resolved legends, the ambiguously resolved legends tend to emphasize the limited power and abilities of particular mediators as well as of entire classes of mediators.

In contrast, positively resolved legends, which account for 61.5% of the mediated legends, provide, at the very least, rhetorical support for the various classes of mediators. By far the most common mediator in positively resolved legends is the minister. In 76% of the positively resolved legends, the first mediator called succeeds in repelling the haunt. An example of this simple form of mediation appears in a story told by S. K. Andreassen:

Der gik en gjenganger her nede i en af tofterne, som hørte til en af gårdene, nordvest for kirken. Men så kommer pastor Hansen, og han var så godt læer, han satte ham ned og rammede en pæl ned over ham. De gamle her i min ungdom de talte så meget om den pæl og den nedmaning (Kristensen 1892-1901[1980], 5:578).

[There was a revenant down here in one of the paddocks, which belonged to one of the farms northwest of the church. But then Pastor Hansen comes, and he was so good a conjurer that he put him down and drove a post down over him. The old people here in my youth talked a great deal about that post and the conjuring.]

Ministers are not the only mediators who can conjure haunts without any additional assistance, as folk healers and *degn* also successfully conjure on their own as well:
Æ tattere gik jo omkring og tiggede, og så havde de en gang læt dem hus henne i Hindborg. Den gang de var komne til sengs, så rejste folkene i gården af. Så vilde tatterne have at vide, hvor de vilde hen. Ja, de vilde hen at finde deres får, de var bleven henne. Om morgenen spørger tatterne konen: “Fond I æ skåbber, mo’r?” De sagde jo ja, de havde fundet dem. Men tatterne forstod nok, hvad de var henne for, det var, for det der var spøgeri i deres soveværelser, men det vilde de ikke sige dem. Nu er tatterne jo noget kloge, og så manede de spøgeriet ned i tre mænds tid. Den gård lå østen for degnebologen, men er nu flyt ud. Det er den, bitte Jens Møller har (Kristensen 1892-1901[1980], 5:477-78).

[These gypsies went around begging, and one time they’d been given lodgings down in Hindborg. Then when they went to bed, the people at the farm left. The gypsies wanted to know where they were going. Yeah, they wanted to go find their sheep that had gone off. In the morning, the gypsies ask the farm wife, “Did you find your sheep, Ma?” They said, yes, they’d found them. But the gypsies knew well enough why they’d left, because there was haunting in their bedrooms, but they didn’t want to tell them. Now gypsies are somewhat cunning (wise), and so they conjured the ghost down for three lifetimes. That farm lay east of the deacon’s house, but they’ve moved out now. It’s the one that little Jens Møller has.]

Min farbroder, der var degn i Låstrup, har også gjort et spil. En kone i Låstrup gik igjen, og så var de jo ilde farne, for de kunde ikke være der om natten. Så lod han gjøre en stålhånd i smedien og gik derhen, og gjengangeren måtte følge med ham til graven. Der måtte han give hende hånd på, at han vilde gjøre alt ing i rigtighed efter hende. Men havde han nu givet henne den rigtige hånd, havde hun klemt den i stykker. Så blev hun henne (Kristensen 1892-1901[1980], 5:243).

[My uncle, who was deacon in Låstrup, has also played a trick. A woman in Låstrup went again, and so they were hard put out by this, because they couldn’t stay there at night. So he had a steel hand made in the smithy and went over there, and the revenant had to go along with him to the grave. And he had to give her his hand that he’d do right by her. But if he’d given her his real hand, she would have crushed it to pieces. After that she stayed away.]

However, a consideration of who ultimately conjures the revenant fails to provide a sufficiently nuanced view of the positively resolved stories, since the final mediator is frequently not the only mediator.
Approximately 24% of the positively resolved legends include a more complex form of mediation, in which the initial mediator or mediators fail, and additional support is required to conjure the haunt. In the majority of these cases, local ministers fail, and a minister from a neighboring parish is called to complete the task, as in a legend told by Anna Larsen:

For mange år siden huserede et spøgelse i Marvede præstegård. Præsten vilde mane det ned, men spøgelset slog bogen fra ham tre gange. Der blev sendt bud efter præsten Hellig-Jens i Kvislemark, som var bekendt for sin helligdom og klogskab. Ham slog spøgelset bogen fra to gange. Men så spurgte Hellig-Jens ham, hvad han havde gjort...Han havde stjålet for fire skilling hvedebrød fra en fattig kone. Præsten kastede pengene hen til spøgelset, og straks sank det i jorden, og der blev rammet en pæl igjennem det (Kristensen 1892-1901 [1980], 5:186).

[Many years ago, a ghost lived at the parsonage in Marvede. The minister wanted to conjure it down, but the ghost knocked his book from him three times. They sent for the minister Holy Jens from Kvislemark, who was known for his holiness and wisdom. The ghost knocked the book away from him twice. But then Holy Jens asked him, what he’d done....He had stolen four shillings worth of wheat bread from a poor woman. The minister threw the money to the ghost, and it immediately sunk into the ground, and a post was driven through it.]

In another legend, told by Marie Jonsen, a young curate succeeds where many earlier ministers had failed, and thus the story offers support to an up-and-coming minister on a lower rung of the church hierarchy:

Kjøbmand Andreas Vissings kone i Kolding er manet i den gård, hvor hun boede, og det var en ung kapellan fra Seest, der gjorde det. Der er en hvelvning ligesom en ovn inde ved porten, og der sidder hun. De havde haft bud ved mange, for der var ingen ro i huset for hende. Deres heste kom rendende i fuldt firespring ind i gården og satte deres hoveder ind ad døren for at forskrække præsten, men han lod sig ikke forstyrre (Kristensen 1892-1901 [1980], 5:314-15).

[Grocer Andreas Vissing’s wife in Kolding is conjured down at the farm where she lived, and it was a young curate from Seest who did it. There was a vault just like an oven in by the door, and that’s where she sits. They’d sent after a lot of others, since there was no peace in the house. Their horses came running at full gallop into the farm courtyard and stuck their heads in the windows to scare the minister, but he wouldn’t let himself be disturbed.]
These legends all reveal the increasing challenge to the power of the local minister and may speak to the increasing trend of “shopping” for ministers that occurred throughout the rural regions of Denmark in the late nineteenth century.

In other legends, a folk healer, _degn_, beggar, or student steps to the fore after a minister or a group of ministers fails to conjure a revenant. Peder Kristian Kristiansen tells one such story:


[At Essenbøk farm, a virgin went again. Then two ministers come and they’re supposed to conjure her; but she got power over the first, when she said, “Help, Mr. Berg,” and he wasn’t allowed to. It also went bad with the other one, namely Mr. Berg, and finally a student came, and they asked him to take hold. She said to him, “What are you doing here, you little thief?”...The student threw four shillings at her. Then he got hold of a silk thread and pulled her out of the farm and conjured her. When he’d got her down to her armpits, the other two ministers began to complain, and so he got a bit excited and lashed out with his arm, so she got burial linen in return, and she sputtered and sparked as fire flew about her. She had to break up an entire mile of earth, because she was that far from the place where she could come up. They drove an oak post down over her.]

The two ministers are unwilling to leave well enough alone and, through their ill-advised intervention, nearly doom the student’s efforts. In this legend it is two ministers who fail while in other variants it is as many as twelve; through both the ministers’ failure and their subsequent actions, the power of the church is mocked, while at the same time the remarkable abilities of the otherwise powerless student is lauded.
In another story, a deacon manages through his successful conjuring to stand the normal church hierarchy on its head:


[It was at the time the fields were being partitioned, this guy named Knud lived in Silkeborg, and he gives his farmhand a dollar to move the boundary stone down into his neighbor’s. The farmhand was supposed to move the boundary six cubits, that was an acre, and the neighbor was called Mads Sørensen. He moved from Knud’s farm in November and moved to Horsens, and the next summer he got typhus and died. Then after he’d been buried, he sought out Knud again. When Knud came outside in the evening, he was standing there chalk-white just outside of the door. Knud knew what that meant, and he closed the door again. But since then, every time they
watered their cattle in the evening, they saw him come up just as chalk-white, and people became scared of him. So Knud had to go to the minister and have him come down there. They called the deacon Gregers Gray, and he was the driver for the minister there in Skindbjærg. Then, after they’d been down there a little while, they meet the ghost. This here Mads Sørensen had been told to bring a pry-bar, since he was supposed to be there to move the boundary back. Then when the revenant had arrived, the deacon asks the minister if he’s going to go out to him. Yeah, he wasn’t really used to that. Yeah, well then I’ll do it, says the deacon, and then he went out to him. Then after they talked with each other, the deacon says to Mads Sørensen and Knud that they could come now. The deacon then accompanies the dead one over to that place where he’d dug the hole, and then to where he’d moved the boundary from. And they continued like this until they’d gone the entire length of the boundary line. Then the ghost says, when he gets to the end of the boundary line, “If you forgive me, then God will also forgive you.” Mads said yes, and then the other one immediately disappeared. Then when they were going home, the minister says to the deacon: Now you can get up and sit in my seat, because he was his master. He said “you” (informal) to him before, but now he said “you” (formal).]

In the most extreme cases, it is a beggar who succeeds where ministers have failed, as in a story told by Peder Johansen:


[There is a manor farm here to the east a bit, they call it Stadgård, and ghosts haunted there in the old days. It was the earlier owner who went again because he had been so barbaric toward his peasants. He went in the shape of a monster with horns and bustled about a lot in the main room. Nobody dared to be at the farm at night because of him. So they gathered the ministers together—there were twelve altogether—one night at midnight. They came in the evening and they were also waited on before they were to go to it. Then at twilight, a beggar came, he was otherwise known as Klemmen Unborn because he had been cut out of his mother’s side, and he asked for lodgings for the night. But they said no. First of all, they didn’t have a reasonable room to give him, and second of all, he couldn’t very well be there when everyone else was going to flee from there, and nobody other than these twelve chaps were going to be there, how was he going to handle himself? “Yes,” he says to them, “just let me stay, who knows, you might find my help useful in a bit.”—“Sure,” says one of the people, “if you aren’t any more afraid that you offer to help them, well then there’s a bed here in the hall next to the main room, why don’t you go and lay down there?” So he went in there. Up toward midnight, these twelve ministers arrange themselves in a circle in the main room, each one with a psalm book or whatever in their hands, and they open them up and begin to make quite a ruckus with songs and prayers and what have you. Then when the clock struck, the door burst open and in comes this monster and, for every nod it made toward a minister, his psalm book flew out of his
hands. Then he says, Klemmen, he did: "Now it's my turn, I guess." So he went in there and there was nobody who could understand what he said, but the animal stood still and so he went over and bound a red thread around it horns. Then he pulled it out to the south-east corner of the farm, where there was a large linden tree in those days, and he tied it (the monster) to it (the tree) until the next day when he conjured it down. After that, he didn’t have to ask to get lodgings at that farm.]

In this legend, Peder Johansen's mockery of the clergy is apparent, referring quite informally to the ministers as krabater (chaps) for example. Klemmen Ufød is remarkably calm in his efficient dealings with the revenant, in contrast to the ministers’ somewhat foolish ineptitude. In each of these stories, the power of the church and its ministers is seriously challenged since people who have little or no institutional power emerge victorious. The legends—and the legend tellers—endorse an ideological position that was gaining greater and greater currency at the end of the nineteenth century, namely a direct challenge to the power and authority of ministers and the Lutheran church.

In a descriptive overview of the ghost stories in Tang Kristensen's collections, Joan Rockwell proposes that, "the sheer volume of [ghost story] material make it sociologically impossible to look for a pattern, to attempt...to find clues which may tell us whether ghost-stories have any social...purpose" (Rockwell 1981:44). A careful consideration of the tradition in its historical context directly contradicts her stance. Instead, the nineteenth-century belief in ghosts as attested by the legend tradition, reveals quite clearly the reactions of the rural population to social and historical processes. Unlike Kathleen Stokker's (1995:97) conclusion that the general population feared the minister and were awed by his power—quite possibly the case in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Denmark and Norway as she suggests—the significant changes in the social and political landscape in Denmark during the post- Constitution era led to direct challenges to church hegemony. These challenges were expressed, in part, in the ghost stories. When ghosts appear in the late nineteenth-century rural Danish neighborhood, an individual's answer to the question, "Who ya gonna call?" is one clearly informed by social, political and religious considerations.

University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, California
Notes


2 For a recent study of priestly mediation of ghostly encounters in American Catholic communities, see Brady 1995.

3 Rockwell (1981:44) cites the figure of 2,168, which represents only the stories in the first series (Kristensen 1892-1901[1980]). I have included records from the “new series” (Kristensen 1928-36) but have discounted from my tabulation those records in the published collection which are non-narrative descriptions of folk belief. Approximately one quarter of Tang Kristensen’s legend collection remains unpublished and is housed, along with his original field diaries, at Dansk folkemindesamling.

4 As af Klintberg notes in his study of gast in Swedish tradition, the Swedish terms for ghosts also tend to have negative connotations (af Klintberg 1968: 84). The term gast, however, is only sporadically attested in Danish tradition (af Klintberg 1968:84).

5 The percentage of ghost stories that are mediated interactions is nearly the same in the “new series” of published legends (Kristensen 1934). For simplicity’s sake, in the discussions of the mediated ghost stories, the first series (Kristensen 1892-1901 [1980]) will be used as a representative sample of the collection as a whole, as comparisons across series and with the unpublished collection indicate that the proportions of legend types in the first series reflect proportions for the series as a whole.

6 For a delineation of the types of ghosts that populate Scandinavian tradition, see Pentikäinen’s excellent typology (Pentikäinen 1969). Mediators are rarely called on to deal with the appearance of solicitous or unsatisfied haunts.

7 Tradition participants who adhered strictly to Lutheran theology would possibly choose not to tell ghost stories and so it is hard to measure precisely the degree to which all nineteenth century rural Danes adhered to the folk belief in ghosts. Nevertheless, various studies of Tang Kristensen’s collections have shown them to be representative of late nineteenth-century rural Danish folk belief (Rockwell 1982; Kofod 1984; Holbek 1987; Tangherlini 1994).

8 Johansen (1989) provides a detailed discussion of the impact of the Reformation on Danish folk belief.

9 See also Pleijel 1978.

10 References to ministers refusing to conjure occur in only four of the 327 mediated legends.

11 In one telling variant (Kristensen 1892-1901[1980], 5:461), the community members approach first the dean, who refuses, then the curate, who also refuses, and finally a minister from a neighboring community who agrees to conjure the revenant.

12 Brown (1979:45-54) explores the appearance of folk healers (cunning men) and parsons as mediators of ghostly threat in English folk tradition. See also
Mathisen (1970) for his comments concerning Black Book ministers and “gan-lapper” (Saami attributed magical power).

13 The cotters (husmand), who had spent most of the late nineteenth century mired in abject poverty, were sufficiently organized by 1902, that the “Samvirkende husmands-foreninger” (The Cooperative of Cotter Unions) was established (Scocozza and Jensen 1994:276).

14 In some variants, the minister has cheated Else Nister out of her money, and has failed to fulfill a promise to keep the land out of her neighbor or pension provider’s hands, and thus these stories directly attack the ethical integrity of the minister (Kristensen 1892-1901[]1980, 5:207-209).

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