

From reading to thinking: Student lines of thought in a seminar on Christianity and colonialism

Ingie Hovland

University of Georgia

Abstract

This article describes a seminar I taught on Christianity and colonialism. I wanted to introduce students to some content while also allowing them to practice some of the expert skills that we use in religious studies, and more specifically in my own sub-discipline, the anthropology of religion. In particular, I wanted to make more visible some of our practices of critical reading, and how these can feed into practices of complex thinking. However, given the differences between undergraduate and expert practices, what does “critical reading” and “complex thinking” look like in the undergraduate religion classroom? The article presents student readings and lines of thought through the semester, and describes how these undergraduates began to approach complex thinking on the topic of Christianity and colonialism.

KEYWORDS

cognitive development, learning design, teaching complex thinking, teaching critical reading

1 | INTRODUCTION

“I want you to show me two things in the exam,” I remember my undergraduate teacher insisting, after she had spent several lectures trying to outline to us her area of research, “that you have *read* something, and that you have *thought* about it.”¹ Ok, I thought, I can do that. At the time, her expectations seemed clear to me, and I was able to use them productively. I did not yet know that “reading” and “thinking” in college are, in fact, not clearly defined at all, and that I would later spend years learning how to read and think within a particular discipline – religious studies (or even more

¹I would like to thank Jason Roberts and Wayne Coppins for comments on an earlier draft, Carolyn Medine for conversations about teaching, and Colleen Kuusinen and Melissa Scott Kozak for our supportive SoTL working group. I received helpful feedback at the Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion in March 2018, especially from Jodie Lyon and Carole Barnsley. I would also like to thank each of the students I describe in this paper, for being willing to share their thoughts.

specifically, the sub-discipline of the anthropology of religion). However, a couple of decades later, as I have been considering how to teach my own discipline to undergraduates, I find that I am drawn back to the clarity of my teacher's statement. Essentially, I would like students to read something, and to think about it.

In most humanities fields, the act of engaged reading is the foundation for thinking. Expert readers construct an ongoing, critical conversation with texts in order to build deeper, clearer, and more nuanced reasoning. Strengthening students' ability to engage in this type of thinking is usually one of the core aims of a liberal arts undergraduate education. However, the process through which reading can be used to build thinking in humanities classes is halted if students do not read, or if they read but view the reading as "the last word" instead of as a conversation. The process depends, therefore, not just on motivating undergraduate students to read in the first place, but also on showing them how to read in certain ways that may be new and obscure to them. Critical reading is, in this sense, what Joan Middendorf and David Pace (2004) have called a disciplinary "bottleneck." In other words, learning to use advanced reading skills to build thought is a key disciplinary step that is not immediately obvious even to competent beginners, and one that students need to understand for themselves before they can enter into the disciplinary habit of mind that proficiently links reading and thinking.

One of my goals as a teacher is to make these disciplinary modes of reading and thinking visible in my classroom. I draw here on the "decoding the disciplines" conversation (e.g. Middendorf & Pace, 2004; Middendorf & Shopkow, 2018; Shopkow, Díaz, Middendorf, & Pace, 2013). Scholars in this conversation argue that college-level instruction is more effective when it focuses both on teaching content as well as teaching students how to begin to acquire discipline-specific expert skills – such as disciplinary reading and thinking practices. The goal is to equip students themselves to be able to use these skills to turn the unorganized data they encounter in the world into disciplinary knowledge. The first question this raises – "How can I teach students to do what I do?" – immediately raises a second, even more fundamental one – "What do I do?" As experts, we seldom reflect on the steps involved in reading and thinking in our research area, because we now move through these steps automatically.

This article will examine how I sought to facilitate students' reading and thinking practices, and how students responded, through a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) project in one of my classes at the University of Georgia. The class was an upper-level undergraduate seminar titled "Christianity and Colonialism in Africa," which I taught in Spring 2018. I began with the questions: How can I more effectively bring reading into the undergraduate classroom? And how can I link it to thinking? In this article I concentrate on a selection of the readings and some of the lines of thought that developed in the class. I take an ethnographic approach, observing and describing what happened in my classroom, much like the "show and tell" approach identified by Patricia O'Connell Killen and Eugene Gallagher (2013, 115).

In the following section I set the stage by outlining my working definitions of "critical reading" and "complex thinking." In the remainder of the article I discuss the ethnographic material from my SoTL project, divided into six segments from different parts of the semester. In the conclusion I draw out some questions that may be useful for other instructors wishing to reflect on reading and thinking in their own classrooms.

2 | CRITICAL READING AND COMPLEX THINKING

"Critical reading" means different things across different disciplines (as evidenced, for example, in the variety of definitions discussed in Horning, Gollnitz, & Haller, 2017).² Even within one discipline, such as religious studies, scholars read differently in different sub-disciplines or for different types of projects. There is not much literature on reading in religious studies, but one exception is Carolyn Medine's (2016) article on teaching close reading. She outlines a classroom exercise in which her students individually annotate a short excerpt, collectively discuss their observations, and end up with an articulation of what may be important in the text and why. Her aim is "fluent reading," which she

²See, by way of comparison, Manarin, Carey, Rathburn, and Ryland (2015) on student reading across different disciplines, and Wineburg (2001) on student reading in history.

defines as “the capacity to read analytically (and, for me, appreciatively), deploying the strategies of reading in a high-process, improvisational mode” (Medine, 2016, 359). She discusses the intertwined web of reading strategies that students practice through this close reading exercise, such as selecting, reflecting, responding, questioning, deciphering, and drawing connections to other texts.

In this article I use my own working definition of critical reading. It seems to me that, broadly speaking, when religious studies experts read we do not take what the reading says as the last word, but instead read and think iteratively. We enter into a type of critical, engaged back-and-forth between our own thoughts, one aspect of the text, another aspect of the text, other texts, and the thoughts of other readers about these texts. We locate the text in relation to our own research data and our own understanding of the world. We integrate the reading into the conceptual map we have of related issues in our mind, thus further building that map. My working definition of critical reading therefore focuses on the ability to draw connections between concepts within a text, and between concepts in the text, other texts, other readers, and the world (including the reader's own experience and perspective). While this working definition is particular to my own approach and aims as a teacher-scholar, it will no doubt resonate with researchers and teachers across a wide range of fields in the humanities and social sciences.

This type of engaged reading leads to a type of thinking that may be given several labels, and we often describe it using the general term “critical thinking.” For this article, however, I will use the slightly more targeted term “complex thinking.” While there is no agreed-upon definition of this term, it has been used by some SoTL scholars in English and literary studies, especially with reference to students' ability to read and think about different layers of a text. For example, in a SoTL study in a class on humor, students practiced digging deeper into the subtext of humorous pieces in order to build “complex thinking” (Cicccone, Meyers, & Waldmann, 2008). Similarly, in a SoTL study of a poetry lesson, students were tasked with identifying diverging patterns of meaning in a single poem, thus again practicing “complex thinking” (Chick, Hassel, & Haynie, 2009).

Building on these earlier contributions to the SoTL literature, my working definition of complex thinking is, broadly, the ability to identify and connect different parts of a constructed whole (and the whole may simply be an academic construction such as a question, an issue, or a field). In my classes this includes, more specifically, the ability to understand descriptions of others' worlds in a text (such as other religious communities or traditions) and how these relate to the reader. I would like students, first, to be able to use their imaginative capacities to enter into other perspectives, and second, to arrive at a nuanced assessment of these perspectives in relation to their own, in order to continue building a richer conceptual understanding of the world. This definition is rooted in my own disciplinary training, since seeking to describe and understand other perspectives is an especially important part of the ethnographic sensibility of cultural anthropology. But it is also part of the broader religious studies skill of entering into the other's moral space, and it further relates to the difficult “historical thinking” skill of recognizing that people in the past may have seen the world differently (Wineburg, 2001). Again, although I am reflecting here on my aims as an anthropologist of religion, researchers and teachers across a range of fields in the humanities and social sciences will find these aims broadly familiar.

How realistic is it to seek to practice this type of critical reading and complex thinking in an undergraduate classroom? In reflecting on this question I have found Barbara Walvoord's (2008) discussion of the religion classroom particularly helpful. Walvoord argues that college-level instruction in religious studies (and the humanities more broadly) is more effective when it creates spaces for student voices, understood within the context of late adolescent cognitive development. She draws on the work of William Perry and others to sketch out some possible cognitive configurations among traditional-age undergraduate students (Perry, 1998; cf. Magolda, 1992). For example, some students may employ a mode of thinking that tends more toward black and white in their early college years, as they are trying to get a firm foothold for themselves as independent thinkers in the world. Others may turn to a mode of multiplicity when their black and white schema is challenged in some way, and they begin to be more interested in others' thoughts, sometimes even taking the stance, temporarily, that all thoughts are equally valid. Others again may approach a mode of committed critical thinking, in which they are able to reflect on the nuances of others' and their own perspectives, while still being willing to commit to a position. These modes are not necessarily discrete or

sequential; rather, students circle between them in the course of a broader trajectory toward greater maturity. In any given class, students engage differently with the material depending on which challenges they themselves are engaging in their cognitive trajectory.

Against this background of late adolescent cognitive challenges, it would be unrealistic to expect all undergraduates to reach mature reading and thinking during college. We all continue to develop our reading and thinking skills during all phases of life. However, in my view this should not discourage us from formulating mature reading and thinking goals for our classes, including the goal of critical reading and complex thinking in religious studies, as long as we are still committed to observing the reality of our classrooms. A commitment to the reality of the classroom involves trying to describe accurately the level of reading and thinking that students reach, without conflating it with the expert skills in my research area that I have gradually absorbed as “normal.” As experts we have refined our reading and thinking through graduate school and subsequent projects (including the act of teaching). When we read and think we make use of a number of abilities that we did not have during our undergraduate years (National Research Council, 2003). For example, without necessarily being able to articulate it, experts draw on a deep conceptual understanding of their discipline to organize their knowledge, and this organization resembles a web of connections between “big ideas” (National Research Council, 2003, 36). They are able to retrieve important aspects of content or procedural knowledge when relevant, with little effort. Against this background, they are able to notice meaningful patterns in data that they would not have noticed as novices, even competent ones. Since it is nonsensical to equate undergraduates with experts, my commitment to reality involves paying attention to instances in which students approach critical reading and complex thinking, and recognizing this for what it is, namely a cognitive achievement appropriate to their stage of life.

I would like my students' cognitive work in class to be part of their broader development. One final consideration this leads to is that I try to allow students to integrate the work we do in class with their normative judgments in life outside the classroom – or with their “selves,” as Walvoord puts it (2008, 15). In other words, in my role as religious studies teacher I choose to model moral bracketing (leaving one's own moral reasoning to the side) while also allowing students' moral engagement in the classroom (as they articulate lines of moral reasoning), despite the contradiction between these two practices.³ My goal is that students will not think of the skills we practice in class as irrelevant to their own worldview and simply shed these skills once they step out of the classroom door. Instead, I would like them to take with them the thinking skills they practice in class, and to view these as part of their own mode of engaging with the world.

3 | A SEMINAR ON CHRISTIANITY AND COLONIALISM

The SoTL project I will present here was carried out in my upper-level seminar “Christianity and Colonialism in Africa” in Spring 2018 (for the syllabus, see Hovland, 2018). The eleven students who were part of the seminar came from a wide range of majors, such as engineering, biology, public relations, accounting, and more. Except for one Masters student who was slightly older, the students were all full-time undergraduate students, lived on or close to campus, and were within the traditional undergraduate student age range. At one point or another during the semester, the majority of the students in the class referred to their Christian affiliations.⁴

I was interested in examining how disciplinary reading practices could become more visible to the students in class, and how I could structure our activities so that the students in turn could use this reading to develop their own thinking. In order to reflect on this issue I placed reading at the core of the class design. Before each class period the students completed a reading and an ICE QQ reading log. This reading log format builds on the ICE framework

³For a good discussion of this intentionally contradictory stance, see Prothero, Gallagher, Pearson, Robinson, & Stortz (2016).

⁴This SoTL study went through IRB approval at the University of Georgia. Participation was optional, no extra work was required, and no benefits were offered to take part. All eleven students gave permission for me to include them in the study. At the same time I acknowledge, as a cultural anthropologist, that it can sometimes be an alienating experience to be described by someone else (while at other times it can be intriguing or affirming). I have tried to bear this in mind, and to convey that the students' thoughts are interesting to me (a point I also sought to communicate in class).

(ideas–connections–extensions; Young & Wilson, 2000), but to focus on the specific skills that I wished to emphasize as part of critical reading and complex thinking, I amended the ICE framework slightly. In each reading log I asked students to jot down three ideas, a connection, an experience, a quote, and a question from the reading. During the first ten minutes of each class period they talked about their reading logs in small groups, to underline that reading was a social activity that we carried out within the intellectual community of our class.⁵

We then worked through two in-class active-learning exercises that addressed the reading, and that were meant to break down some of the steps involved in linking reading to thinking in the humanities. We cycled through a range of reading exercises over the course of the semester.⁶ For example, sometimes I would ask the students to work in small groups to select the most confusing point from the reading, and then try to resolve the confusing point from their neighbor group. At other times, I would ask students to discuss in small groups what they thought was most important or interesting in the reading, and then I would write all their answers on the board, which formed a concept map of the reading. And sometimes I would ask the small groups to formulate questions about the reading at each level of Bloom's revised taxonomy, which then allowed us to discuss questions about the reading ranging from straightforward descriptions to quite complex evaluations. The students bought a workbook for the class that contained all the reading logs as well as pages for the in-class exercises, and they brought the workbook to class each day.

Let me now turn to the ethnographic description of different moments of student thinking in my class. I will present the ethnographic material in six segments. I have chosen to pay special attention to the lines of thought of two individual students, Taylor and Alyssa (I use pseudonyms for students throughout), in order to give a deeper sense of the different kinds of cognitive shifts that were happening at different times in the semester. I selected these two students because they are broadly representative of the type of cognitive work that was happening in the group, as well as the overall level of work. In each ethnographic segment I will bear in mind the underlying question: What is happening here with student reading, and what is happening with student thinking?

3.1 | A funny thought experiment

During the first weeks of the semester we worked directly with my own research, reading through my case study chapters describing the daily life of Norwegian missionaries in colonial-era Southern Africa (Hovland, 2013). Our first reading was a chapter that describes how the missionaries started out by establishing specific spaces, known as mission stations, with residential houses, a school house, a stable, fields, and a church. I asked students to work in pairs to jot down thoughts from the chapter. I then asked each student to say one thing about the mission stations from the reading that they thought was important or interesting. I constructed a concept map on the board as they spoke, writing down the keywords that they suggested and drawing lines between those that seemed related. In the end the concept map included several factors, such as: the missionaries' daily prayer, the European medicines, the missionaries' efforts to learn Zulu, the challenges of translating Christian concepts, the practice of reading (Zulu at the time was a wholly oral language), the implications of oral transmission of the Christian gospel, the introduction of European clothing on the stations, the implications of building rectangular European-style houses on the stations (rather than the traditional round Zulu houses), and the broader context of early British colonialism.

Once the concept map was complete we paused for a moment to consider it together, and to allow time for questions. Chloe asked: "Were missionaries afraid of difference?" and, in reference to the materiality of the mission station (the clothing, houses, and medicine), Emma asked: "Was this part of religion?" In her workbook, Alyssa noted down the question: "What would it be like to be the Zulu people?" She also wrote down, in reference to the mission stations: "Place of worship in Europeans' mind, but culture shock for Africans." These comments and questions were representative of the class's early reading and thinking. The students were quite capable of drawing out key ideas from a descriptive text. They were also able to ask questions that related to their own perspective, and even to some

⁵The reading logs are explained more fully in Hovland (2019; forthcoming).

⁶A selection of the in-class reading exercises are described more fully in Hovland (forthcoming).

extent to imagine the perspective of the actors in the text. However, there was not yet much complexity to these thoughts. The students were still simply voicing questions as they occurred to them, along with some obvious answers, without yet grappling to try to construct new knowledge by more fully entering into this other situation.

One of the students commented on the absurd undertone to this event: the first Norwegian mission station in the Colony of Natal, on the southeastern African coast, was built on a plot of land that was granted to the Norwegian Mission Society by Queen Victoria. I asked what they thought it would be like if a similar thing happened in our town of Athens, Georgia. They laughed, and speculated how crazy it would be to have strangers arrive and tell us that they were giving away the land on which we lived. These strangers would have some type of technology that we did not understand, the students continued, such as laser guns, and we would think they were able to shoot fire from their hands, leaving us powerless – a scenario that caused further rounds of laughter. “Funny thought experiment,” Alyssa noted in her workbook. In retrospect, this comment seems quite apt: the laughter on this first day did have a sense of being a way to begin engaging with an experiment. We had not yet begun to seriously enter into the enormity of colonialism, or to consider Christianity’s role in it, in the careful and even somber way that experts might approach this task. Instead, the students were trying out ways to approach this world that still seemed outlandishly different, even “crazy,” to them.

3.2 | A foolproof way does not exist

During the first couple of weeks, Taylor’s reading logs were fairly neutral, and at times lightly affirmative of the colonial-era missions. She noted down about the mission stations, for example: “presence -> community -> impact.” However, by the time we got to the fourth reading, which described the ambivalent, hierarchical relationship that developed between European missionaries and their African converts, she began using the reading log to problematize the material. In her reading log, she wrote under “experience” that the problem of gendered paternalism on the nineteenth-century mission stations connected to the same problem in Christianity today. This was the first time she was bringing her own critical questions into the workbook and integrating them with class material. For that same reading log, Alyssa too noted pointedly of the Norwegian missionaries: “role of racism (how long does it take to realize you are not in Norway).” In Alyssa’s next reading log, which dealt with African perceptions of the mission stations, she wrote under “experience”: “I would be really mad if people came into Athens and completely changed my way of life.” She returned here to our thought experiment on the first day of class, but with a somewhat changed tone. Taylor, on the other hand, in this log formulated a question that seemed unexpected to me, namely: “How did missionaries and Zulus find that balance?” When reading it later I wondered if she was sensing a tipping of the scales, and was actively working to recalibrate her historical assessment. During these first few weeks, then, there was a sense in the class that the students were working out how they could think about this new material.

After the first few weeks, the students wrote a 500-word “analysis for a friend.” For this assignment I asked them to select one issue from the previous weeks’ readings, and to write out a line of thought about this issue. I suggested that they address their analysis to a friend, since having a specific audience in mind often forces us to write more clearly. I gave several prompts, asking them first to explain the issue and reflect critically on the way that it was addressed in the readings, then to discuss which assumptions they and others might bring to this issue and how this might shape different perspectives on it, and to ask higher-order questions that sought to understand others’ perspectives. Finally, I asked them to articulate their own nuanced position on the issue, including possible objections.

In her analysis, Taylor chose to return to her thoughts on missionary paternalism. On the one hand she was clearly critical, labeling colonial-era paternalism an “error,” and giving reasons. On the other hand, there were layers to this thinking. In a concept map planning the analysis, she had summed up the plan with the phrase “find the balance.” This reminded me of her earlier question of how the missionaries and Zulus could “find that balance.” In this case, however, she had applied it to her own thinking in which, it seems to me, her aim was to find a balance between the nineteenth-century missionaries and herself. Toward the end of her analysis she wrote: “I have to give myself a reality

check,” and “as much as I want a [...] foolproof way to persuade someone, that does not exist.” She was approaching here the difficult acknowledgement that social actions undertaken by Christians (or any group) have multiple, contradictory effects. She went on: “I must learn to reason with the fact that we do live in a fallen world” – with the implication being, in this case, that she saw the social living out of Christianity as also “fallen” or corrupted. She noted that this was something that had not previously been integrated into her reasoning, but that she now thought she ought to integrate.

Alyssa, in her analysis, decided to focus on the missionaries' chosen strategy of setting up mission stations. Addressing herself to a friend, she introduced the issue: “As I was thinking about what to write to you, I was thinking about different aspects of the mission station that I like and dislike, but then I thought to myself, [...] I am pretty sure Jesus never made any mission stations.” This insight seemed to allow her to bring together her previous disparate thoughts on the stations – their focus on European-style preaching, reading, farming, living arrangements, money – into a more coherent analysis of “mission station” life. She connected this to the fact that the missionaries seem to have been “relieved” when the British military invasion (and its aftermath) broke down Zulu social structures. In the rest of the analysis she contrasted mission stations with the alternative “apostolic” life that she thinks the missionaries could have adopted, had they chosen to live as traveling preachers. “Apostolic” life, she concluded, would have had a far less destructive impact on Zulu society. She stated: “Social structure should not matter. Jesus preached to lots of people that were different from him, and he didn't have to destroy them.”

We see here how both Taylor and Alyssa were still sketching out issues surrounding Christianity-in-the-world in rudimentary terms early in the semester. Their thinking stands in some contrast to expert thought habits such as a careful weighing of objections to one's own arguments. However, their analyses were still an important step toward approaching critique, especially in the form of deeper questions, in their minds. They were beginning to grapple with the complex issue that lived-Christianity is not “foolproof,” in Taylor's term. They would continue to work on these thoughts and build in more complexity in the following units.

3.3 | Are not missionaries connected to everything?

As we approached the middle of the semester, we read through three contrasting theories on the relationship between Christianity and colonialism. The three class periods in which we worked with these three different readings had, to me, different tones. The first reading was an excerpt from Nosipho Majeke's (1952) *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest*, which argues that missionaries were imperialists. For our first reading exercise, I wrote down a number of different terms related to the reading, scattered across the board: Missionaries, European settlers, British indirect rule, British military conquest, African traditional religions, African converts, African population, education, protection, peace, taking over land, authority of African chiefs, Bible, and divide and rule. I asked one of the students to come up and draw a line between any three concepts that she wanted to connect, and then I gave the other students a chance to guess why she had connected those three. After a few students had done this, Jay spoke up: “Aren't missionaries connected to everything?” Brandon took the challenge, and went through each term on the board and suggested how missionaries were connected to each one. The students were focused and serious during this exchange, and when I asked, as a way of summing up: “So if you think this is an interconnected mesh, does that mean you agree with the missionary imperialism thesis?,” the general consensus in the room was that whether the Christian missionaries actively intended it or only passively played a part, they had been a part of making imperialism happen. The somberness of this class period contrasted markedly to the funny thought experiment about colonialism we had constructed at the beginning of the semester, indicating that the students were beginning to feel the weight of assessing this historical situation.

The following class period we discussed Jean and John Comaroff's (1986) article “Christianity and colonialism in South Africa.” Though the work of the Comaroffs on the missionaries' colonization of consciousness is somewhat challenging to read for undergraduates, Taylor and Alyssa both used connections to previous readings in their reading

logs to build bridges for themselves to this new theoretical material. Taylor noted under “connection” in her log: “Planting the seed’ (Majeke reading) and ‘invading the mundane’ [Comaroffs]: both are subtle ways to gain significant influence over the minds and behaviors of the Africans.” Alyssa wrote a question in her log: “Why were the missionaries unaware of their influence[?]?” In class that day, there was a note of annoyance in several of the students’ comments. Emma, for example, commented on the nineteenth-century British missionaries that the Comaroffs write about, with some exasperation: “They just *can’t* take in the African world!” Samantha, likewise, commented: “I grow impatient that they can’t just appreciate the value and beauty of African life.” I asked whether she would have wanted the missionaries to reimagine Christianity. She responded that no, she would not have wanted the missionaries to change Christianity, but to “have more grace.” I asked whether, in her view, it would have been possible for the missionaries to combine Christianity and African culture. Samantha hesitated, and indicated that at this point she was not sure. “Not ancestral spirits – not things that go against the gospel,” she suggested, though still uncertainly. (We had not yet read about how many African Christian churches today combine Christianity with ancestral spirits in a myriad of ways, which prompted much interested discussion on this topic later in the semester.) As the discussion continued, Alyssa commented on the missionaries, in a dejected tone, “They should have just left them [the Africans] alone.” The annoyance with the missionaries, and the uncertainty to which this gave way, remained unresolved during the class period.

In the third period in this sequence, we turned to Dana Robert’s (2009) *Christian Mission*. The chapter we read included some discussion of the nineteenth-century British missionary David Livingstone, ranging over both some critiques and some of his impacts that have later been lauded, such as his anti-slavery stance. The students’ comments this time had a more hopeful tone. I asked the students to say which quote they had chosen for their reading log, and why. Alyssa’s quote was: “Since the days of Paul in the New Testament, Christians who brought the message of Jesus Christ have been charged with interfering with the established social order” (Robert, 2009, 88). She indicated that this had opened up some space for her to think about social change as a mixed process, not something that is in and of itself desirable or undesirable. She said she had liked this reading, and later added, optimistically: “I liked this reading because I was wanting to see some good news – Christians were not all evil!” Taylor had chosen the quote: “Missions are condemned for introducing social or cultural changes, or for being connected to outside global forces such as imperialism, colonialism, westernity, or modernity” (Robert, 2009, 88). Similarly to Alyssa’s quote, Taylor’s also opened up some space for thinking about social change, but she was concerned more with the critique of mission to which it referred. She said it had made her ask the following question: “Can the memory of missionaries be saved?”

For one of our exercises that day, I drew a horizontal line on the board, and wrote Majeke at one end of the line, the Comaroffs in the middle, and Robert at the other end. We thus had a theoretical spectrum that ranged from the argument that the missionaries were imperialists (Majeke), through seeing the missionaries as colonizers of consciousness (the Comaroffs), to a more benign view of the social changes introduced by the missionaries (Robert). I asked the students which argument they had found most persuasive and where they would place themselves on this spectrum. They all had different answers. Samantha, for example, suggested two different positions between Majeke and the Comaroffs depending on which mission society one was talking about. She and Alyssa both said that if considering David Livingstone they would place themselves somewhere between the Comaroffs and Robert, with Alyssa closer to Robert than Samantha. Nicholas said he would place himself immediately next to the Comaroffs, as he had found their interpretation most persuasive. Brandon, on the other hand, wanted to draw a line along the entire spectrum, to indicate that in his view all the arguments came into play in different situations, and David similarly wanted to draw a large circle around the spectrum, encompassing all the possible theoretical approaches. Taylor suggested that the spectrum was a “sliding scale” and that in her view the missionaries had started out closer to Robert but then moved along the spectrum all the way to Majeke over time.

As a group, then, the students reached a nuanced level of thinking during this class period. I had a sense during our discussion that because they had found some of the readings difficult, they collectively enjoyed the accomplishment that came with having completed the sequence and being able to note down their own positions in relation to these scholars, as well as in relation to each other in the class. At the same time, it seemed to me that there were still many

unanswered questions hanging in the air, such as why the missionaries seemed “unaware” of their influence, why they could not “take in” the African world, and whether the memory of missionaries could be “saved.” While the students were able to try out different scholarly perspectives, it was still difficult for them to imaginatively enter into the missionaries’ perspective(s), especially in those cases when the students were critical of the missionaries’ actions. As a teacher, I found this sequence of readings important because it was the first time in the semester that many of the students indicated they felt confounded, which is often a productive (albeit frustrating) phase in the development of more expert understanding. They were searching, at this point, for an understanding of *how* this historical situation – this complicated interweaving of Christianity and colonialism – could have come about, since it seemed so foreign to their own understanding of Christianity. In other words, they were more seriously grappling with the question of what exactly the relationship was between their own perspective and the missionaries’ perspective. This resonates with the habit of thought that experts use when they wrestle with the difference of historical actors.

3.4 | Disappointment, confusion, conviction

A little later we read an excerpt in which the Comaroffs (1997) outline seven propositions on colonialism. I asked David to lead an initial discussion of the reading that day and to write the points raised by the other students on the board, around the two key concepts “colonialism” and “Christianity.” The students raised a variety of points. Jessica focused on the fact that colonialism affected not just the colonized but also the colonizers. Emma speculated that the missionaries “probably saw that things were going wrong on the stations, but felt like they should be loyal to the colonial power.” Nicholas wondered whether nineteenth-century missionaries would change their views if they were to be transported to our time. Samantha suggested that while both colonial officials and missionaries came in with “an idea of superiority,” the crucial historical development was how “that idea had grown and concretely solidified.” Taylor, referring indirectly to the challenge of reading more of the Comaroffs, commented succinctly that: “What they’re trying to say for fifteen pages is ‘colonialism = complicated.’” Samantha suggested that the term “means of control” could be placed between the concepts “colonialism” and “Christianity” on the board, connecting them. Taylor made a note about Samantha’s comment in her workbook: “Christianity during colonialism: used mainly as a means of control and therefore had elements of *corruption* – Samantha.”

The students’ attention then turned to the concept “Christianity” on the board. Brandon suggested that “[Christianity] is the opposite in my view, in reality. It was originally from the Middle East, it wasn’t originally a Western religion.” “Yes!” Samantha agreed, and commented on the relationship between (Western) colonialism and (Western) Christianity that was being mapped on the board: “[This is] so interesting because it’s not originally a Western religion!” “So what is Christianity?” David, who was still leading the discussion, asked the group. Several people made suggestions, and he wrote on the board the following terms: Jesus Christ, love, faith, grace, the Bible, the Great Commission (Jesus’s commandment to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth), and “universal, for everyone.” During this discussion I was committed to remaining silent for a while. I was feeling aware that the students were describing a particular strand of modern, Western, evangelically-inflected Christianity. There was some tension between their insight, which they were able to bear as a group, that Christianity originated in the Middle East a long time ago, and the associated insight, which they did not reach or were not at that moment able to bear, that their particular Western understanding of Christianity was unlikely to represent Christianity as a whole across centuries and continents. However, looking back at the class period later, I appreciate the work they were doing here to untangle their understanding of Christianity from the missionaries’ understanding of Christianity.

We then worked through a close reading exercise. I gave the students translated excerpts from some of the Norwegian missionary letters I had worked with in my own archival research. This was a somewhat different reading experience for the students. We had already touched briefly on methodological issues in relation to how to read primary mission sources, but the immediacy of the material still struck some of them in a way that any archival researcher will recognize. As Taylor put it later: “I like seeing that *this* is what *they* actually said.” The excerpts I

had selected this time included sentences in which the missionary author aligned himself conceptually with an abstract idea of “whiteness” over against the Africans he interacted with on a daily basis, saying, for example: “But a white man we must have there [on the station].” I gave the students some time to read the excerpts silently and annotate them. Taylor wrote across the top of her sheet the summary sentence: “Natives = stupid + incapable.” In her workbook she expanded, both drawing directly on phrases from the missionary letters as well as her own inferences:

Natives = stupid + incapable

- national laziness + national stupidity
- eating meat + drinking beer [...]
- holier than thou
- need a white man [...]
- natives are still not able
 - ~ I'm annoyed w/the Norwegian missionaries
 - > b/c THIS IS NOT CHRISTIANITY.

After the period of silent reading and annotation, I asked the students to share their thoughts. They were quick to draw connections between these letter excerpts, the contradictions of colonialism highlighted by the Comaroffs, and the contradictions we had already discussed in the case study material on the nineteenth-century missionaries. Several of the students mentioned the European missionaries' double-edged stance in relation to the African converts, which Brandon summed up as follows: “Try to become like us! You'll never be like us!” Samantha commented that it was “sad” that contradictions could be observed in the missionaries' practice just as in the colonial officials' practice. I asked whether she was saying that Christianity is so complex that it could have turned out differently. Samantha, somewhat hesitantly, ventured: “It could have.” Taylor added, more certainly: “It *should* have.”

After some further conversation, Taylor stated forcefully, looking at the excerpts from the missionary letters: “It all just makes me so *disappointed* in our ancestors!” Alyssa tried to provide a counter-perspective, pointing out that the missionaries were still different from other whites such as colonial officials, especially in the significant fact that they did not kill Africans. Taylor, however, was not really willing to concede the point that day. She pointed at the missionary quotes again and said, frustrated, “They're just saying the Africans are incapable!” I suggested that perhaps Alyssa was saying that we can distinguish between missionaries and colonizers as categories, but that Taylor on the other hand was leaning toward saying missionaries were just absorbed into the colonizer category. Taylor nodded in full agreement. Alyssa was less certain. “It all makes me so confused,” she reflected, “these terms, like colonization and colonizer.” She pointed to one of the missionary letter excerpts and continued: “He *did* see himself as a white man,” implying that this did complicate the picture – and her categories.

One thing that struck me about this exchange was the fact that Taylor, who had grown increasingly critical of the missionaries and even questioned their right to call themselves Christian, was in this frustrated moment connecting to them as her “ancestors.” If I map my own framework onto hers, I could say that she had arrived at a point where she recognized how difficult the connection was between her as a Christian and these other nineteenth-century Christians, but she had found that she was still able to bear this difficult link – and therefore she was able to think about it. In other words, she neither excused them nor completely disowned them – both responses that she could have taken if the complexity had become too much for her to cognitively integrate. I think the difficult feeling of disappointment that she expresses – “It all just makes me so *disappointed*” – and her willingness to own this disappointment, marks a layer that she had been able at that point to add to her thinking. Similarly, Alyssa was working to integrate some of the complexity of the historical situation, but from a different angle. Rather than working from her own standpoint and backwards, as we might say Taylor did, Alyssa tried to work from the missionaries' standpoint

and forward – a task no less difficult. In wondering whether we can really work with clearly defined categories when describing these social actors, and being able to own this confusion rather than deny it, she too added a layer to her own thinking.

As this class period was drawing to a close, the students had a brief exchange on racism. “Christianity convicts racism,” Brandon stated, unequivocally. Wanting to deepen this, I offered the following nuancing: “Christianity has been used to justify *and* convict racism – and your view is it should only convict racism.” “Yes,” Brandon responded, and pointing to the nineteenth-century missionary letter excerpts, he asked, “Are we reading the same Bible?” Wanting again to nuance this in relation to the missionaries’ perspective, I asked, “What are you *not* seeing, when you read the Bible, that they saw?” Brandon responded, “What were *they* not seeing?” Several other students nodded energetically. It seemed to sum up satisfactorily, in their view, some of the underlying sentiment of this discussion, namely the bewilderment they had touched on regarding how these people who called themselves Christian, albeit in a different time and place, could say and do things that my students found ethically shocking. Both Taylor and Alyssa jotted down parts of this exchange in their workbooks, with Taylor writing: “Christianity has been used to justify racism, when it should have convicted them for it – Brandon.” Alyssa noted: “Missionaries were using Christianity to justify racism. It could have turned out differently.”

The students ended this class period, then, by circling back to the common human need to pull disparate elements together and arrive at some certainties. Using my own anthropological terminology, I see them here circling back to an understanding that Christianity is something that *is*, rather than something that happens (and that happens somewhat differently each time). But there were several layers to the cognitive work that preceded and occasioned this pulling-together. There was, for example, some genuine bewilderment at the nineteenth-century missionaries. There were also several gestures toward using Christianity’s own in-built possibility of critique of its own cultural manifestations (Mosse, 2012, xii). This opened up some space during the class period for thinking about Christianity, and the difficult relations between different perspectives.

3.5 | It's all very complicated

At the end of this unit I again asked the students to write a 500-word “analysis for a friend.” Taylor concentrated on the line of thought she had wrestled with in class: “the missionaries had a very degrading viewpoint of the natives, which I don’t believe coincides with the heart of a true Christian [...] ‘Christian’ means to be like-Christ.” She incorporated two of our readings in her line of thought, saying first that: “I developed strong feeling towards this misportrayal of [Christianity] during class after we read the 1997 Comaroffs piece,” and then discussing two of the excerpts from the missionary letters. In her preparatory notes for the analysis, she had asked: “Why would they think this?” In the analysis itself, she sought to reach some understanding of the missionaries’ perspective, mentioning their “Norwegian cultural lens” and the historical context, with its “air of confidence” and “the divide between the white man and the ‘other.’” However, she clearly did not feel that this fully explained the tension she detected in the sources. She conjectured that perhaps she was missing other sources or readings: “this class is tailored to the colonialism aspect of mission work, so there definitely are other writings out there that I’m sure would serve to counter my argument, we just haven’t read those (yet).” Because of this possible lack of representative sources she concluded that “I find difficulty in establishing a final judgment on the Norwegian missionaries,” though, she finished, “I expected more kindness from my ‘Christian’ ancestors.” We see here how Taylor was working with several themes at this point: What is Christianity across historical periods? How do we approach the difference between us and historical actors? How far can we trust historical sources? Her (temporary) conclusion managed to knit together a standpoint that approached complexity, especially in the way she integrated a judgment on how to categorize Christianity, a holding back of judgment about these specific historical Christians, and a partial judgment of some of their specific actions.

In class that day we gave everyone a few minutes to explain the main issue in their “analysis for a friend.” Most of the students were working with issues surrounding the complicated relationship between Christianity and culture.

For example, Emma was working with the difference between her own view that religion played a role in colonialism, and what she argued was the missionaries' view that Christianity was separate from colonialism. Samantha returned to the question I had asked her previously: could they have reconciled Christianity and elements of African culture? Yes, she argued this time, but she also turned the question around and argued that they might not have understood our categories of religion and culture. Ryan argued the opposite, namely that Western culture and Christianity could not have been separated by the missionaries at the time. Alyssa had explored the "perplexing" issue of how differently Christianity can be perceived in Western and African groups. Jay summed up some of the sentiment in the room when his turn came and he commented: "It's all complicated, there are so many perspectives, it's so varied. You can't really simplify it."

During the course of the class period, Taylor, whose written analysis before class had expressed some measure of confidence in her assessment of Christianity during this historical period, turned more toward the variety of arguments presented in class. I asked the students to talk in pairs and then to write down individually four statements that they thought were true about the material covered over the past few weeks, and to illustrate one of their statements using pipecleaners. Taylor wrote: "1. Colonialism is complicated. 2. Christianity and Western culture are very much related. 3. Everyone has a different perspective. 4. It's difficult to find an ultimate conclusion." She then heaped all her pipecleaners on top of one another in one big jumble. When I came around to talk, she explained: "This is colonialism - it's complicated." Interested in pursuing this a little deeper, I asked: "Is it also Christianity? Is Christianity complicated?" Taylor disagreed, but suggested a compromise: "It's colonialism and Christianity." Ryan pointed to one silver pipecleaner buried in the midst of the jumble and commented: "There's Christianity." Other students worked with similar themes. Emma, for example, had pushed together a number of pipecleaners into a tight, impenetrable knot. "This is culture," she explained. "There are so many things - you can't separate any one thing out."

I then asked the students to write in silence for five minutes to answer a few questions about their learning. Taylor continued to explore questions. In response to the prompt about the most important thing she had learned over the past few weeks, she wrote: "The missionaries' perspective on the colonized. - There are so many opinions and viewpoints. - Which is valid? which is justified? all? none?" Alyssa, meanwhile, continued to reflect on the differences in the way Western and African churches had developed, and wrote: "I feel like I did not integrate as much as I should have." In response to the question of whether she had contributed in class, however, she wrote a definite: "Yes! I add my thoughts and perspectives."

Toward the end of our class period, David indicated he did not have an answer to a question, and resorted to the phrase that had become oft-used by then: "It's complicated." This time, everyone laughed. I commented: "That could be the tagline for our class: it's complicated." "It's all very complicated," someone joined in, and Brandon stated: "If we get the key concept 'colonialism' on the quiz I'm just going to put 'It's all very complicated' - I expect full credit for that!" "That's going to be my final paper: 'It's all very complicated,' just that phrase, repeated for seven pages," Jay declared, to further amusement around the table. David added: "I'll say: There was *this* thing, and there was *this* thing, and there was *this* thing, and they all together made ..." He searched for the right word. "The complication," Alyssa suggested, to more laughter. I reflected afterwards on this laughter tied to complication. It was funny to the students in both senses of that word, I think: both humorous and strange. Our laughter signaled an underlying sense of the strangeness of inquiry: Why is it like that? How can the world be this way? Perhaps they were also laughing at the threat of the complication in order to diminish it - namely the threat of the underlying knowledge that it's all (learning, self, relations in the world) very complicated. In a limited and tentative way, then, the students were experimenting here with the expert habit of thought that is willing to accept complicated problems in place of straightforward answers.

3.6 | Gestures toward resolution

Richard Mann et al. (1970, 289) suggest that toward the end of a semester, students and instructor will tend to work, if possible, toward a certain level of affective and cognitive resolution. I thought of this suggestion when I reviewed

our last day of class. On this day I had brought a large stack of postcard-sized pictures and asked the students to choose one that summed up their learning in the class. Alyssa chose a picture of a turtle swimming in the expanse of a bright blue ocean. It illustrated, she explained, the experience of reading in the class: being surrounded by an overwhelming amount of information. However, she commented that the turtle represented a point of relatability, something that provided connection, and a path through the reading ocean. Some of the other students chose images that similarly showed a sense of something potentially overwhelming that had been brought together, such as a myriad of buildings making up a city, or skydivers holding hands in mid-fall. Taylor chose a picture of a person sitting at a desk “looking closely at something, I’m not sure what,” but clearly being very concentrated. She related it to the experience of writing the 500-word analyses, in which she had tried to both “stay true” to her own thinking as well as carry out analysis. This theme of concentration was represented in some of the other students’ pictures too, such as images of a tree trunk emerging firmly from a large root network, or a golf ball about to roll into the hole. The students, it seems to me, were working to reconcile themselves with their cognitive work in the class, which involved attempting to understand, at the end, *what* that cognitive work had been.

These gestures toward resolution were continued in the final papers, which students submitted approximately a week after the last class period. In Taylor’s final paper, she highlighted as the most important theme of the class the contrast between the Norwegian mission stations and Livingstone’s mission philosophy, which in her judgment was “gentler and less invasive.” In her line of thought about the relationship between Christianity and colonialism, she included one new point that surprised me: “Had I been in this situation, serving as a European missionary [...] I would like to think that I would have acted differently [...] but I doubt that is true.” She also included some metacognitive discussion, saying that she had found the “analysis for a friend” assignments most challenging, because they “forced me to reckon with other people’s perspectives,” and this kind of thinking, she went on to say, can be hard, because all the thoughts can become overwhelming. However, she suggested, we need to “reason through them.” This seems to have been her own (perhaps temporary) conclusion, at the end of the semester, regarding the complicated connection between herself and the missionaries. Alyssa too gestured toward resolution in her final paper. She returned to one of the questions I had asked in class: “What was the missionaries’ perspective?” and, discussing it further, she stated: “They tried to do what they thought was right.” For Alyssa, this was a significant move toward their perspective. Her primary interest, however, was to go beyond this, and she suggested that the most important theme of the class in her view had been the African response to Christianity, concluding: “I always associated Christianity with North America; I never considered that Christianity has a big presence in Africa. [...] Christianity is a more global religion than I ever thought was possible.”

The students had worked with different themes through the semester. They had moved between different cognitive positions, and arrived at different (still evolving) answers by the end of the class. Taylor had paid attention to themes of disappointment, othering, reasoning through too many thoughts, and concentration. By the end of the class she had managed to integrate Christianity-in-the-world with what she termed “fallenness,” while still allowing it to be her tradition. One underlying question we might identify in Taylor’s work progression is: Can Christianity be this fallen? Yes, it can, she concluded, at least for the time being. Alyssa, on the other hand, had paid attention to themes associated with African responses, perspectives, confusion, and finding paths through overwhelming readings. By the end of the class she had managed to integrate Christianity in different parts of the world as part of the same tradition, while maintaining an awareness of both her own commitment *and* the difference of other perspectives. I might sum up one of her underlying questions as: Can Christianity be this big? Yes, it can, she ventured, at this point.

4 | CONCLUSION

So, in conclusion, let me return to the questions with which I began: Did students read something, and did they think about it? It seems to me that, overall, the focus on reading in this class did encourage students to engage with the material in ways that began to approach the practices experts use. By the end of the semester they had not, of

course, taken on all the thought practices that anthropologists of Christianity use as routine. However, while they on the whole still held a sense that there was a clear way of “being Christian,” they had made some shifts toward greater complexity in their conceptualization of Christianity-in-the-world, and they had built richer and more flexible maps of issues surrounding the history of Christianity. And most of them had – like Alyssa and Taylor – managed to bear the weight of entering into other perspectives and arriving at nuanced assessments of these in relation to their own. If we compare their engagement with the readings at the beginning of the semester to their engagement toward the end, we see that they had taken some small steps toward more complex thinking.

I think there are two main lessons that can be drawn from this study for other instructors. The first is a practical one. Across all religious studies classes (and beyond), undergraduate students are repeatedly being asked to enter an expert conversation as a novice. Other instructors who wish to incorporate a focus on teaching expert skills to these novices will recognize that while my study was particular to my disciplinary approach and class, and even to myself as a researcher and instructor, the same starting questions can be used by others. The primary questions that guided my work, as outlined in the introduction, are those discussed in the “decoding the disciplines” conversation (see, for example, Middendorf & Pace, 2004; Middendorf & Shopkow, 2018; Shopkow, Díaz, Middendorf, & Pace, 2013). Broadly speaking, I sum up these questions as: How can I teach students to do what I do? – and: What do I do? The scholarly work on “decoding the disciplines” provides a sequence of more targeted questions with extended discussion and examples, including: “What is a bottleneck to learning in this class? How does an expert do these things? How can these tasks be explicitly modeled? How will students practice these skills and get feedback? What will motivate the students? How well are students mastering these learning tasks?” (see Figure 1.1, Middendorf & Pace, 2004, 3).

The answers to these questions are not immediately obvious. Since part and parcel of becoming an expert is to automate the steps we take, for example when we read and think, those steps themselves gradually become invisible to us. We have to make a mental effort to break them apart again. As I sought to do this I arrived at particular working definitions of critical reading and complex thinking, which guided how I tried to teach these skills. My own definitions had a specific focus on connections and perspectives, and this guided the work I asked students to do in class. Other instructors will arrive at different definitions of reading and thinking, related to their discipline, topic, and research approach.

Beyond these practically-oriented questions, I think the second conclusion to emerge from my study is one regarding reality. On the surface it is rather banal: as I paid attention to the students' shifting concerns over the semester I was reminded again and again of the fact that practicing complex thinking in a particular disciplinary field is just that – complex. As instructors, we may sometimes tend to assume (or hope) that undergraduate students read, think, and learn in our classes at a higher level than they do in reality. We also perhaps tend to hope that the process of acquiring advanced reading and thinking skills can occur quickly and easily. The real process is painstakingly slow and confusing, and difficult to describe accurately. The most significant conclusion to my mind is therefore the importance of reminding ourselves of the fact that undergraduates are novice thinkers in our field, and what that means. Our own expert thought once began as novice thought. As instructors, we have to repeatedly cast our mind back to that earlier stage, enter into it imaginatively, and try to understand what things look like from our students' perspective.

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