When I first told my mother—a liberal, secular New Yorker—that I wanted to
cross an ocean to study for a bachelor’s degree in theology, she was equal parts aghast and concerned. Was I going to become a nun, she asked in horror, or else one of “those” wingnuts who picketed outside abortion clinics? Was I going to spend hours in the Bodleian Library agonizing over the number of angels that could fit on the head of a pin? Theology, she insisted, was a subject by the devout, for the devout; it had no place in a typical liberal arts education.

Her view of the study of theology is far from uncommon. While elite universities like Harvard and Yale offer vocational courses at their divinity schools, and nearly all universities offer undergraduate majors in the comparative study of religions, few schools (with the exceptions of historically Catholic institutions like Georgetown and Boston College) offer theology as a major, let alone mandate courses in theology alongside other “core” liberal arts subjects like English or history. Indeed, the study of theology has often run afoul of the legal separation of church and state. Thirty-seven U.S. states have laws limiting the spending of public funds on religious training. In 2006, the Supreme Court case *Locke v. Davey* upheld the decision of a Washington State scholarship program to withhold promised funding from an otherwise qualified student after learning that he had decided to major in theology at a local Bible College.

Even in the United Kingdom, where secular bachelor's programs in theology are more common, prominent New Atheists like Richard Dawkins have questioned their validity in the university sphere. In a 2007 letter to the editor of *The Independent*, Dawkins argues for the abolishment of theology in academia, insisting that “a positive case now needs to be made that [theology] has any real content at all, or that it has any place whatsoever in today's university culture.”

Such a shift, of course, is relatively recent in the history of secondary education. Several of the great Medieval universities, among them Oxford, Bologna, and Paris, developed
Why Are Hundreds of Harvard Students Studying Ancient Chinese Philosophy?

in large part as training grounds for men of the Church. Theology, far from being anathema to the academic life, was indeed its central purpose: It was the “Queen of the Sciences” the field of inquiry which gave meaning to all others. So, too, several of the great American universities. Harvard, Yale, and Princeton alike were founded with the express purpose of teaching theology—one early anonymous account of Harvard’s founding speaks of John Harvard’s “dreading to leave an illiterate Ministry to the Churches”, and his dream of creating an institution to train future clergymen to “read the original of the Old and New Testament into the Latin tongue, and resolve them logically.”

Universities like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton no longer exist, in part or in whole, to train future clergymen. Their purpose now is far broader. But the dwindling role of theology among the liberal arts is a paradigmatic example of dispensing with the baby along with the bathwater.

Richard Dawkins would do well to look at the skills imparted by the Theology department of his own alma mater, Oxford (also my own). The BA I did at Oxford was a completely secular program, attracting students from all over the religious spectrum. My classmates included a would-be priest who ended up an atheist, as well as a militant atheist now considering the priesthood. During my time there, I investigated Ancient Near Eastern building patterns to theorize about the age of a settlement; compared passages of the gospels (in the original Greek) to analogous passages in the Jewish wisdom literature of the 1st century BC; examined the structure of a 14th-century Byzantine liturgy; and read *The Brothers Karamazov* as part of a unit on Christian existentialism. As Oxford’s Dr. William Wood, a University Lecturer in Philosophical Theology and my former
tutor, puts it: “theology is the closest thing we have at the moment to the kind of
general study of all aspects of human culture that was once very common, but is
now quite rare.” A good theologian, he says, “has to be a historian, a
philosopher, a linguist, a skillful interpreter of texts both ancient and modern,
and probably many other things besides.” In many ways, a course in theology is
an ideal synthesis of all other liberal arts: no longer, perhaps, “Queen of the
Sciences,” but at least, as Wood terms it, “Queen of the Humanities.”

Yet, for me, the value of theology lies not merely in the breadth of skills it taught,
but in the opportunity it presented to explore a given historical mindset in
greater depth. I learned to read the Bible in both Greek and Hebrew, to analyze
the minutiae of language that allows us to distinguish “person” from “nature,”
“substance” from “essence.” I read “orthodox” and “heretical” accounts alike
of the nature of the Godhead, and learned about the convoluted and often
arbitrary historical processes that delineated the two.

To study theology well requires not faith, but empathy.

Such precision may seem—to the religious person and agnostic alike—no more
useful than counting the number of angels on the head of a pin. But for me, it
allowed me access into the fundamental building blocks of the mentality, say, of
a 12th-century French monk, or a mystic from besieged Byzantium. While the
study of history taught me the story of humanity on a broader scale, the study of
theology allowed me insight into the minds and hearts, fears and concerns, of
those in circumstances were so wildly different from my own. The difference
between whether—as was the case in the Arian controversy of the fourth-century
AD—the Godhead should be thought of as powerful first, and loving second, or loving first and powerful second, might seem utterly pedantic in a world where plenty of people see no need to think about God at all. But when scores of people were willing to kill or die to defend such beliefs—hardly a merely historical phenomenon—it’s worth investigating how and why such beliefs infused all aspects of the world of their believers. How does that 12th-century French monk’s view of the nature of God affect the way he sees himself, his relationship with others, his relationship with the natural world, his relationship with his own mortality? How does that Byzantine mystic conceive of space and time in a world he envisions as imbued with the sacred? To find such questions integral to any study of the past is not restricted to those who agree with the answers. To study theology well requires not faith, but empathy.

If history and comparative religion alike offer us perspective on world events from the “outside,” the study of theology offers us a chance to study those same events “from within”: an opportunity to get inside the heads of those whose beliefs and choices shaped so much of our history, and who—in the world outside the ivory tower—still shape plenty of the world today. That such avenues of inquiry have virtually vanished from many of the institutions where they were once best explored is hardly a triumph of progress or of secularism. Instead, the absence of theology in our universities is an unfortunate example of blindness—willful or no—to the fact that engagement with the past requires more than mere objective or comparative analysis. It requires a willingness to look outside our own perspectives in order engage with the great questions—and questioners—of history on their own terms. Even Dawkins might well agree with that.
13 Oscar-Winning Movies, Recreated With Stock Footage

Can you guess them all?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TARA ISABELLA BURTON is a Clarendon Scholar at Trinity College, Oxford, where she is working on a doctorate in theology and literature. She has written for Los Angeles Review of Books, Guernica, Salon, and The New Statesman.