

# Short Course in Theology

## *The Bible and Belief: Truth, Authority, and Religious Commitment in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*



**ACU North Sydney**  
Winter Term, 2019

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# Short Course in Theology

## Lecture 1: Alternative Facts, Fake News and the Search for Truth

Dr. Jamie Parr

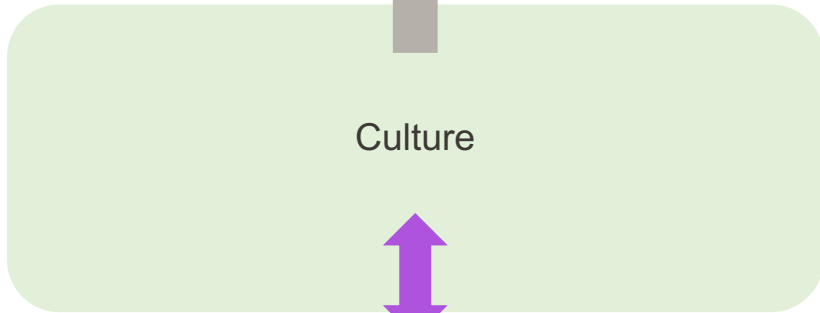
July 31, 2019

# Preamble

**A**

'Fake News',  
'Post Truth'

- Reflects culture
- Suspicion, criticism
- Traditional Authority Weakened



Culture

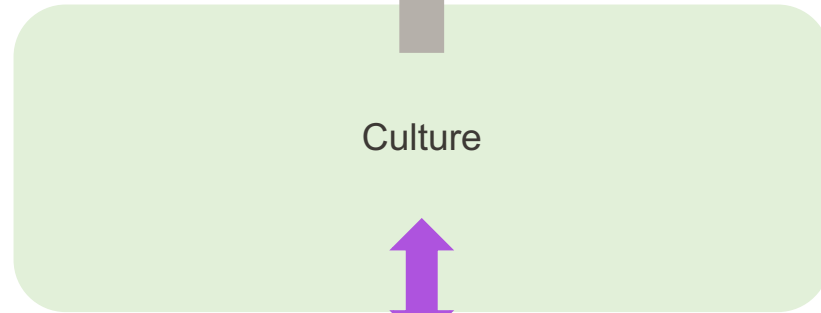


- Must take seriously
- Requires response
- **Catastrophic for faith;** no way back
- Future is unclear; a new path, a new way of life, is required

**B**

'Fake News',  
'Post Truth'

- Reflects culture
- Suspicion, criticism
- Traditional Authority Weakened



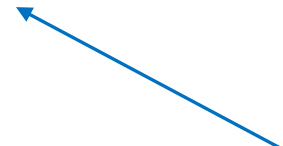
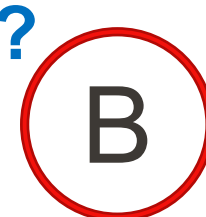
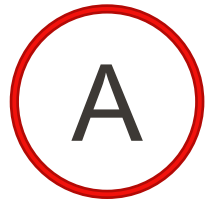
Culture



- Must take seriously ✓✓
- Requires response ✓✓
- **Not catastrophic for faith** ✗
- Future is unclear; **renewal and reflection is required**

*Lecture Sections*

1. Introduction: Human Nature and Christian Truth
2. Nietzsche's Pascal: The 'Intellectual Conscience' & Christianity's 'End'
3. Jean-François Lyotard: Resistance to Metanarratives
4. Fake News, Post Truth: A Landscape of Challenge
5. Conclusion: Liability / Opportunity



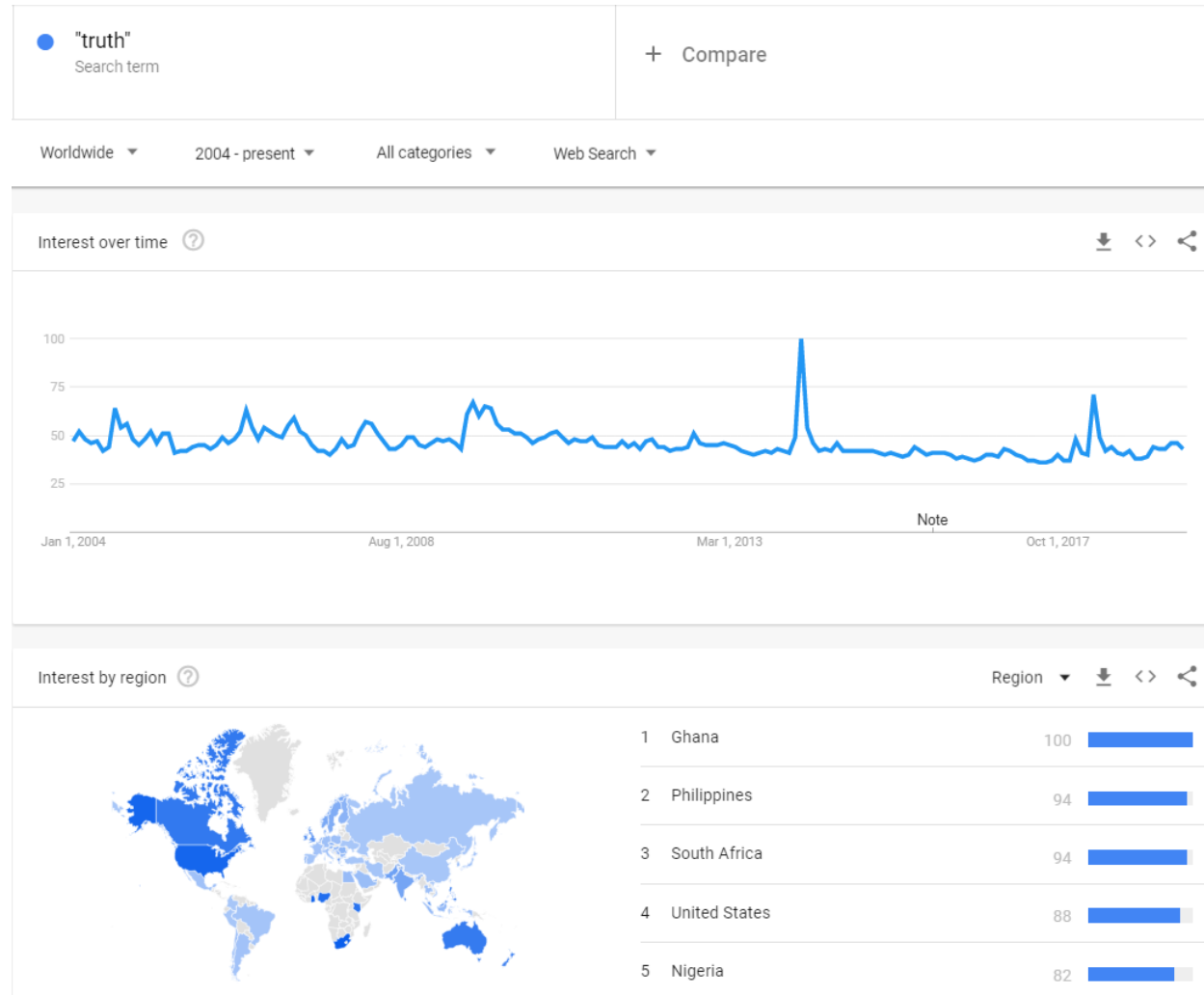
### *Principal Ambitions*

- To see the issue of ‘fake news’, etc. as *symptomatic* of a set of challenging cultural conditions.
- To see these issues as a contemporary, sharply posed iteration of a *perennial* problem of human culture; deception and mistrust are not new phenomena.
- To suggest that, while they should be taken seriously and responded to directly, our current cultural conditions do *not* herald a catastrophe for Christianity.
- While the articulation of Truth may be considered a liability by some, and may be so in practice (according to certain cultural conditions), given the needs and desires of human nature, Truth is also the greatest *asset* of the faith.
- To suggest that, in response to challenging contemporary conditions, spiritual *reflection* and renewed cultural *engagement*, must be part of the response.

# Introduction: Human Nature and Christian Truth

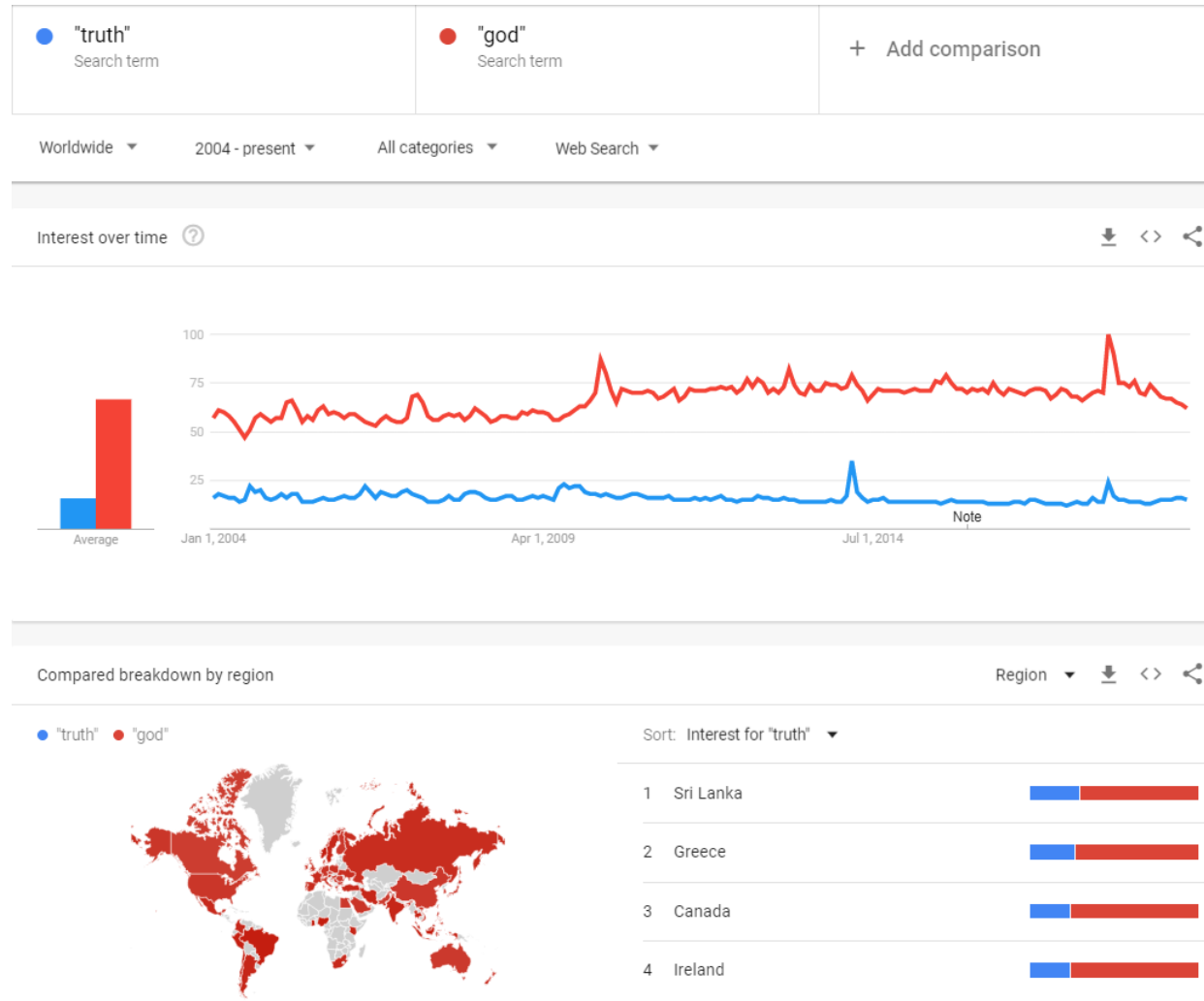
# 1

# Introduction: Human Nature and Christian Truth



Data: Google Trends (<https://trends.google.com/trends/?geo=US>) Publicly accessible information.

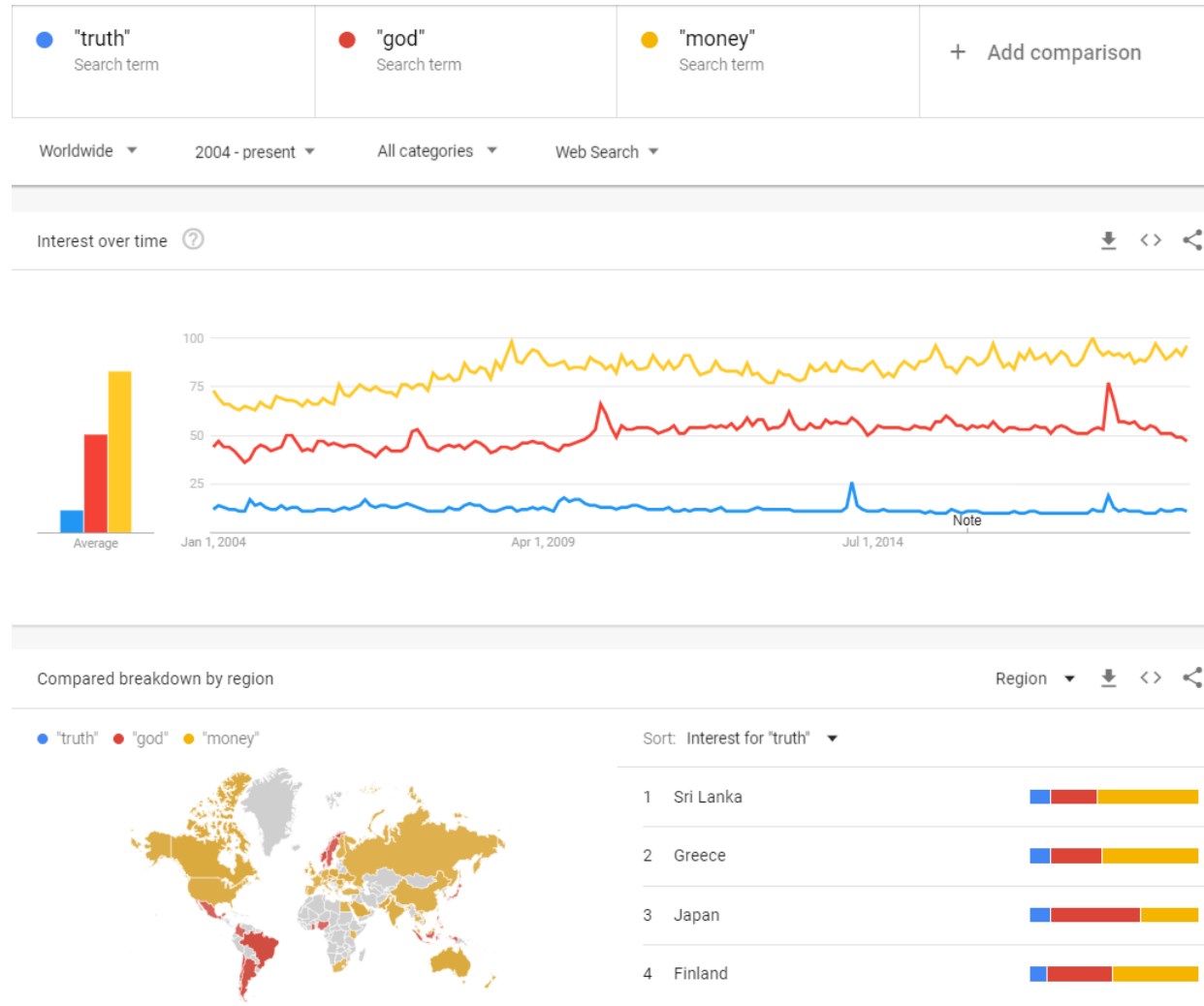
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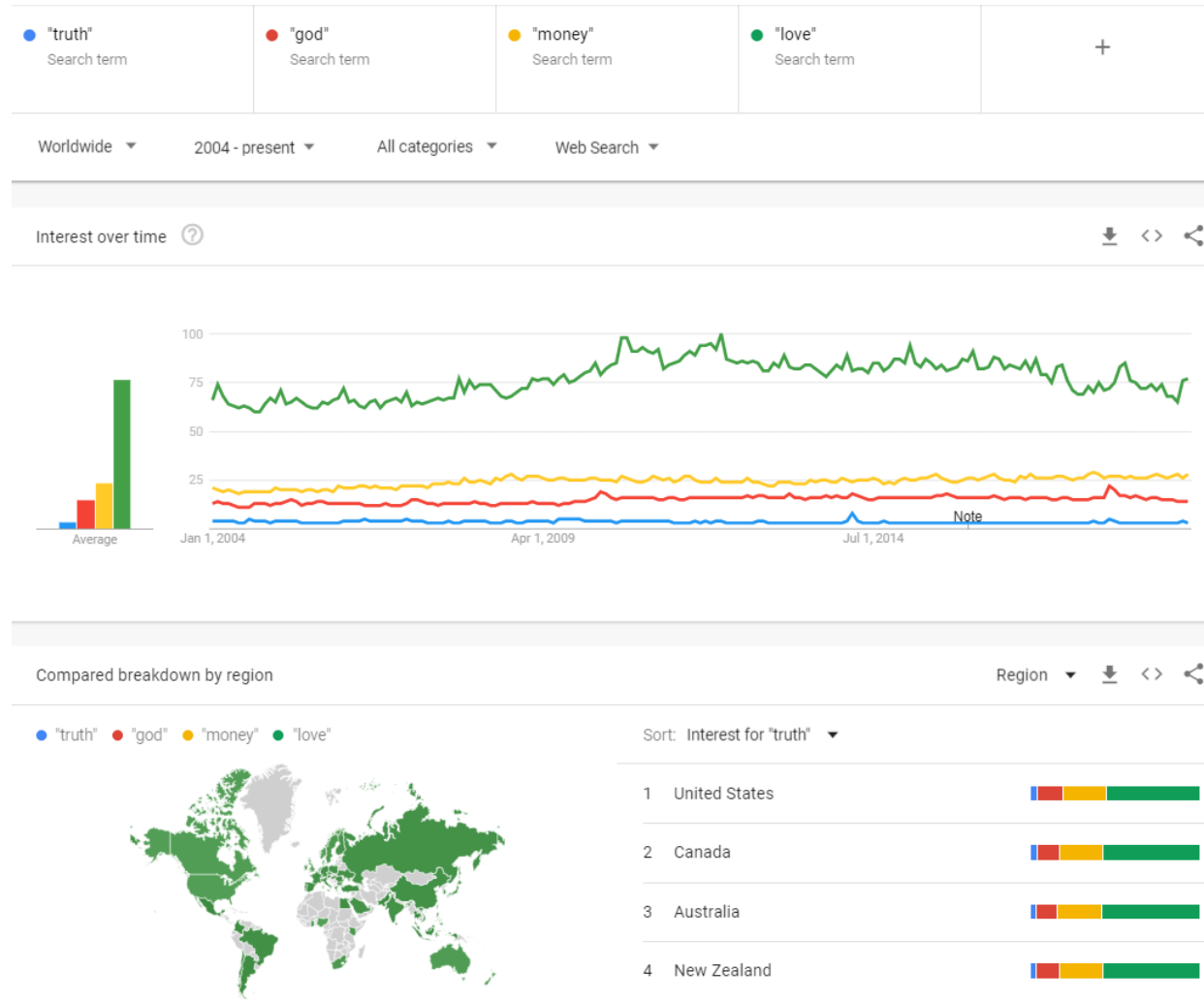


# Introduction: Human Nature and Christian Truth



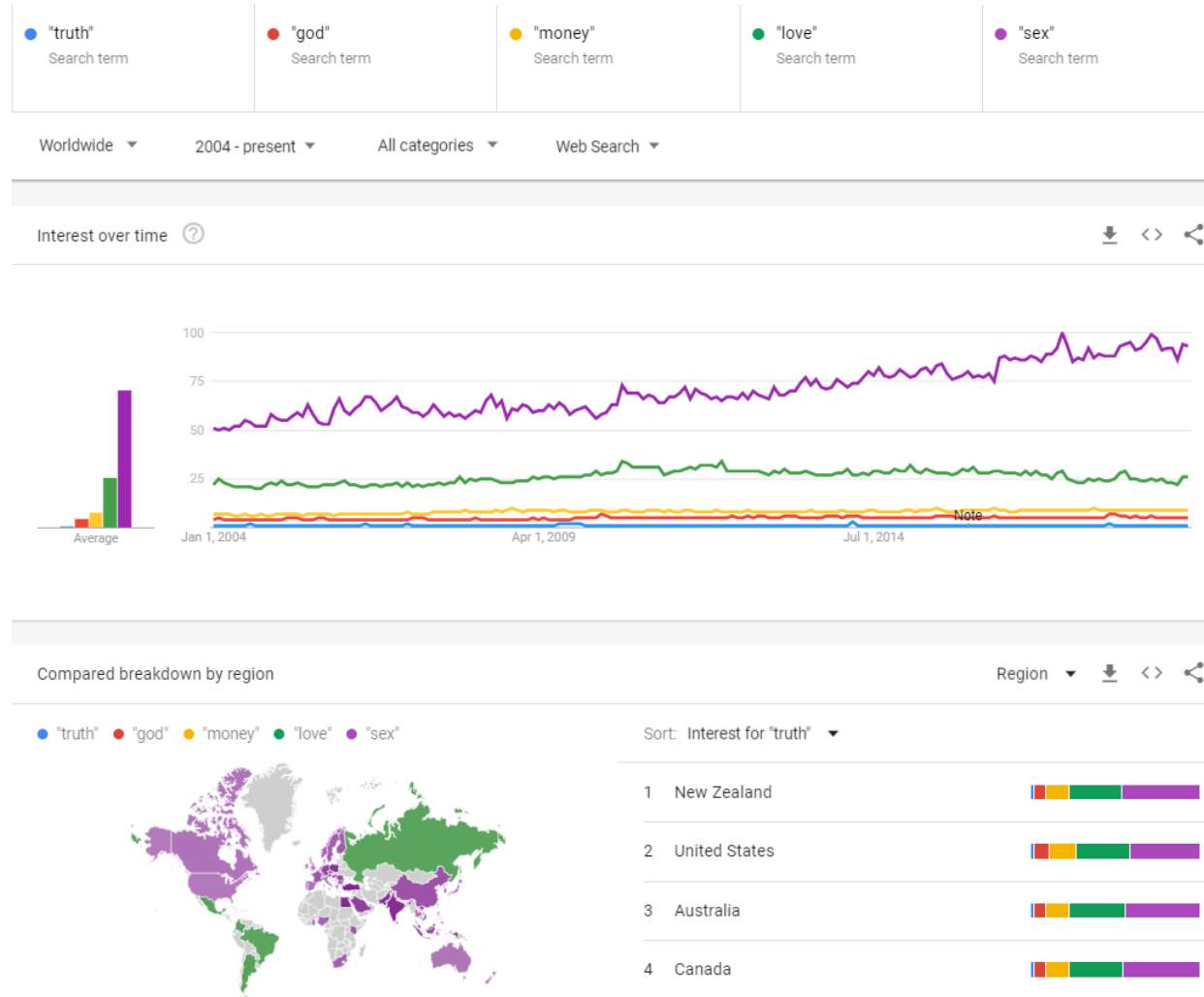
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# Introduction: Human Nature and Christian Truth



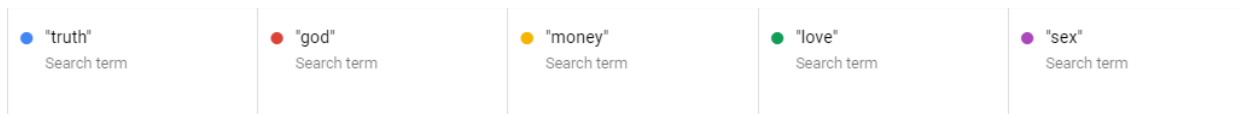
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## Introduction: Human Nature and Christian Truth

### *Human Nature from a Christian Perspective*

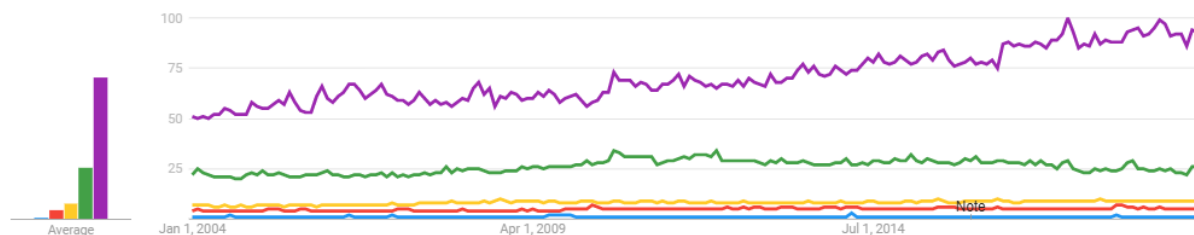
- We were made in the image of God (*Gen. 1.27*); simultaneously corporeal and spiritual (*Gen. 2.7*).
- We were made with the intention to become, body and spirit, temples of the Spirit (*1 Cor. 6.19-20*).
- We were created in Paradise, from which, in the persons of the ancestral couple (Adam and Eve), we Fell (*Gen. 3*). Their descendants – ourselves included – inherited the weakening of our nature caused by the Fall.
- Now, we each are prey to the confusion, disorder, lustfulness, pain, and ultimately, death, that is the inevitable consequence of the sinfulness of our Fallen state (*Gen. 3.16-19*). Compared to our ‘original’ condition, in Eden, we are damaged and disordered creatures.
- Christ, the ‘New Adam’ (*1 Cor.15.21-22*), allows us to resist and overcome the forces of sin and, as a event leading to oblivion, death. Such is the *evangel*, the ‘Good News’, of Jesus Christ; His grace brings about a transformation of believers.
- **Therefore: starving for truth, meaning and purpose, we will always find nourishment in the Truth of Christianity.**

# Introduction: Human Nature and Christian Truth



Worldwide ▾ 2004 - present ▾ All categories ▾ Web Search ▾

Interest over time ⓘ

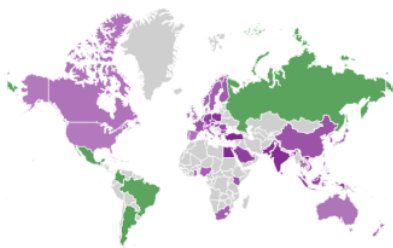


Compared breakdown by region

Region ▾

● "truth" ● "god" ● "money" ● "love" ● "sex"

Sort: Interest for "truth" ▾



Rank	Region	Interest Breakdown
1	New Zealand	High interest in "sex" (purple), "love" (green), "money" (yellow), and "truth" (blue).
2	United States	High interest in "sex" (purple), "love" (green), "money" (yellow), and "truth" (blue).
3	Australia	High interest in "sex" (purple), "love" (green), "money" (yellow), and "truth" (blue).
4	Canada	High interest in "sex" (purple), "love" (green), "money" (yellow), and "truth" (blue).

We are addicted *en masse* to **sex** and sensual pleasures, and this is so, at base, because we are Fallen; once we discover that we are ontologically disordered in this way, we have the means to properly interpret the problem of ourselves.

The craving for **love** is a universal human desire; we were made in love, by the source of all love, and only once we learn the true nature, object, and practice of love, can we begin to reorient our loves toward that which makes us truly happy.

The desire for **God** is present in us always, but so often it is muted, smothered, by other concerns; of course, a perennial Christian idea.

## Introduction: Human Nature and Christian Truth

A suggestion: this graph shows us an image of ourselves. It has always been a core Christian observation that we consistently **compound the problem of ourselves** through our actions.

Today, we have the Internet. The data we pour into the Internet, every second of every day, builds for us an image of ourselves that is ... confronting.

It is also the Internet that arguably has done most to loosen the grip traditional sources of truth and authority have on us.

*These observations are vital for all of us, believers and non-believers alike. Why? Because we each have a fundamental need to feel that our lives have meaning and purpose.*

**We are all implicated in the problem** of the issue of fake news, of question marks regarding *the nature and possibility of truth*, and the possible loss of *the traditional framework* by which we have made sense of the world for so long.

For two millennia, Christianity has supplied vast segments of the human population with the means to do just this, *to transfigure the problem of existence into affirmation, joy and thanksgiving*. As Nietzsche saw with great clarity, the loss of this ability to deal constructively with the pain of life opens the door to despair and calamity.

*The Transfiguration of Christ*  
Matthew 17.1-8; Mark 9.2-8; Luke  
9.28-36



Public domain: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Transfigurazione\\_\(Raffaello\)\\_September\\_2015-1a.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Transfigurazione_(Raffaello)_September_2015-1a.jpg)

*The Boy with an Evil Spirit*  
Matthew 17.14-20; Mark 9.14-29;  
Luke 9.37-42



*The Transfiguration*, Raphael  
(1516–20)







## Introduction: Human Nature and Christian Truth

The Christian transfiguration has given Western civilization the means to transform the problem of human existence into affirmation, joy, art, and celebration.

The transfiguration of Christ both reveals, in His Body of Glory, the heavenly state of redeemed believers, and the work to be done, in this life, to bring one to that point:

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into His image with intensifying glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” (2 Cor. 3.17-18)

Today, in many places on Earth, Christianity exists within plural, multi-cultural, and increasingly secular societies. The contemporary concern regarding fake news, the so-called ‘post-truth’ landscape, and the general skepticism shown by many toward traditional sources of meaning and purpose in life, seem to place in jeopardy Christianity’s ability to meaning and purpose to entire populations. Is the issue of fake news the sign of an impending collapse of belief in truth itself?

# Nietzsche's Pascal: The 'Intellectual Conscience' and Christianity's 'End'

# 2

## Nietzsche's Pascal: The 'Intellectual Conscience' and Christianity's 'End'

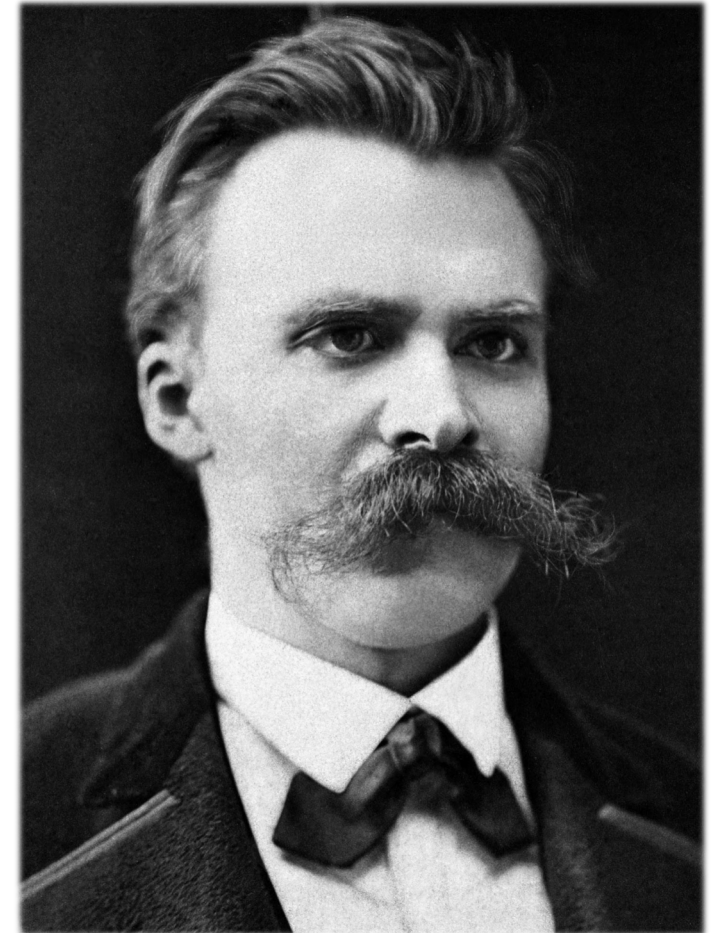
### Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900)

The impact of Nietzsche on the modern Western mind has been immense, particularly in disciplines such as philosophy, religious studies, psychology, etc.

His thought might reasonably be considered to form one branch of the root system of the modern condition.

Often dismissed, or misunderstood, merely as a destructive and nihilistic individual, in fact his intellectual project was concerned at base with the *avoidance* of nihilism, and the need, as Nietzsche saw it, to liberate human beings from the 'anti-natural', damaging effects of ascetic thinking in general, and Christianity in particular.

Nietzsche was fascinated by Pascal, simultaneously admiring of and repelled by him. **Crucially for us, he believed he saw in Pascal the way in which Christianity would collapse.**



## Nietzsche's Pascal: The 'Intellectual Conscience' and Christianity's 'End'

### Blaise Pascal (1623–1662)

Pascal was one of the most luminous and provocative minds of the seventeenth century.

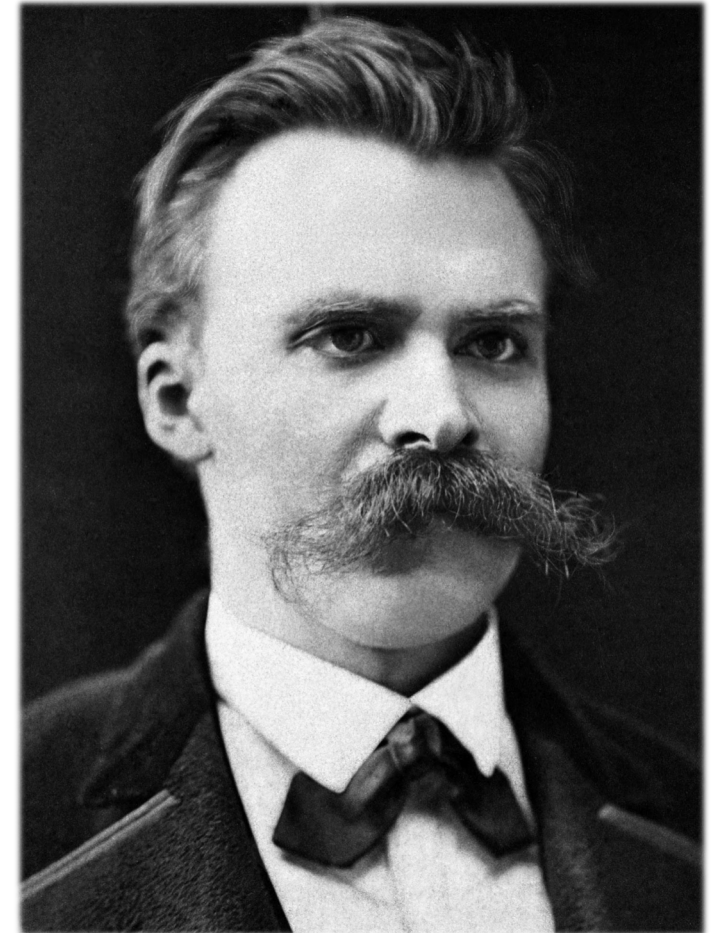
- 1623: Born in Clermont-Ferrand, France
- A precociously brilliant child with an early penchant for geometry and mathematics.
- 1646: Pascal family come under influence of the so-called Jansenist group of Christians.
- 1647: Scientific and mathematical work; meets Descartes.
- 1651-4: 'Worldly period', ended by religious conversion.
- 1656-7: Write the *Provincial Letters* (contra Jesuits)
- 1658: Work on the texts later known of *Pensées*.
- 1659: Decline in health.
- 1662: Dies in Paris



## Nietzsche's Pascal: The 'Intellectual Conscience' and Christianity's 'End'

*The first Christian.* – All the world still believes in the writings of the 'Holy Spirit' or stands in the after-effect of this belief: when one opens the Bible one does so to 'edify' oneself, to discover a signpost of consolation in one's own personal distress, great or small – in short, one reads oneself into and out of it. That it also contains the history of one of the most ambitious and importunate souls, of a mind as superstitious as it was cunning, the history of the apostle Paul – who, apart from a few scholars, knows that? But without this remarkable history, without the storms and confusions of such a mind, of such a soul, there would be no Christianity; we would hardly have heard of a little Jewish sect whose master died on the cross. To be sure: if this history had been understood at the right time, if the writings of Paul had been read, not as the revelations of the 'Holy Spirit', but with a free and honest exercise of one's own spirit and without thinking all the time of our own personal needs – really read, that is to say (but for fifteen hundred years there were no such readers) – Christianity would long since have ceased to exist: **for these pages of [Paul's] expose the origin of Christianity as thoroughly as the pages of Pascal expose its destiny and that by which it will perish.**

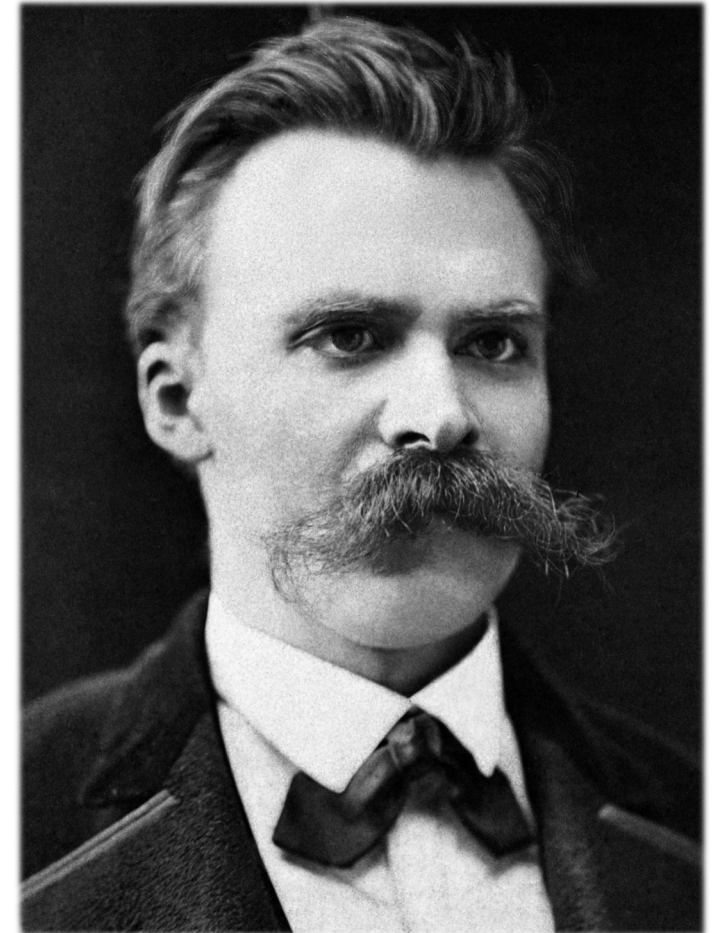
*Dawn §68*



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## Nietzsche's Pascal: The 'Intellectual Conscience' and Christianity's 'End'

### Blaise Pascal (1623–1662)

Nietzsche is referring to Pascal's *Pensées*. It is on this text, largely, that Pascal's non-scientific reputation rests.

The *Pensées* is a remarkable and tragic work. In it, Pascal attempts to turn his readers away from a 'monstrous' indifference to the deep issues afflicting human existence – suffering, death, questions about the afterlife – to a bleak confrontation with the problem of our existence.

For Pascal, *even without God*, the human is inherently noble, by dint of our ability to think, and to think *well*. This leads him to a struggle with the nature and limits of reason – when it is to submit (to the claims of faith, to God, etc.), and when it must be given a freer hand.

For N, this is entirely to the point: on his view, Christianity destroys itself through its careful fostering of the conscience and intellect. It is this self-destructive intellectual honesty, *an intellectual 'hygiene'*, that he finds in the *Pensées*.



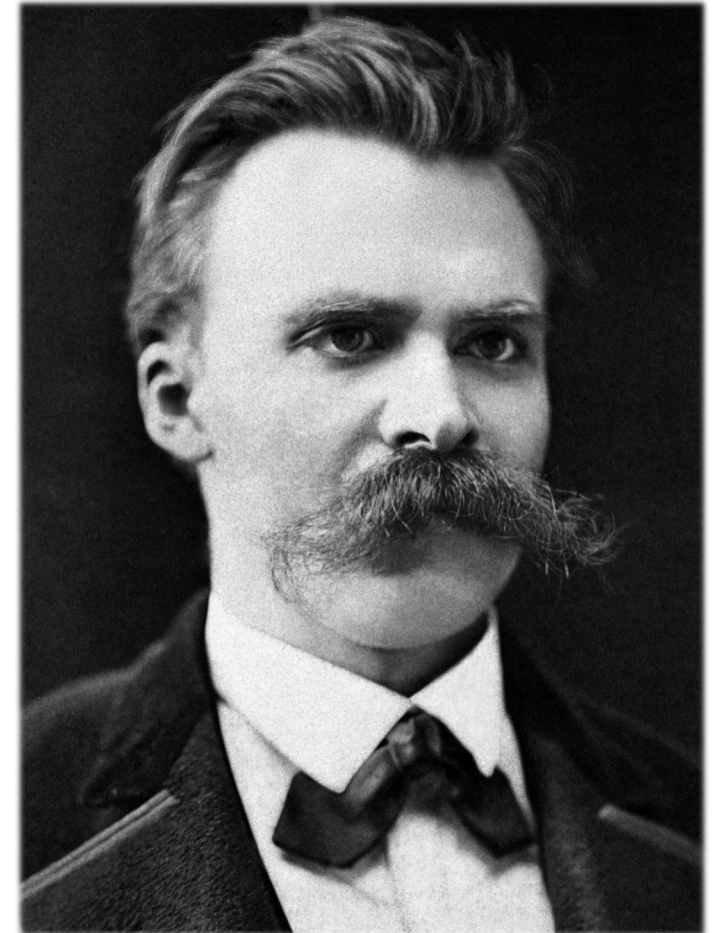


## Nietzsche's Pascal: The 'Intellectual Conscience' and Christianity's 'End'

Thus, for Nietzsche, what conquers the Christian god? Nothing less than...

...Christian morality itself, the concept of **truthfulness** which was taken more and more seriously, the confessional punctiliousness of Christian conscience, **translated and sublimated into scientific conscience, into intellectual cleanliness at any price**. Regarding nature as though it were a proof of God's goodness and providence; interpreting history in honour of divine reason [...]; explaining all one's own experiences in the way pious folk have done for long enough [...]: now all that is *over*, it has conscience *against* it [...] – this severity makes us *good Europeans* if anything does, and heirs to Europe's most protracted and bravest self-overcoming!

*The Gay Science* §357



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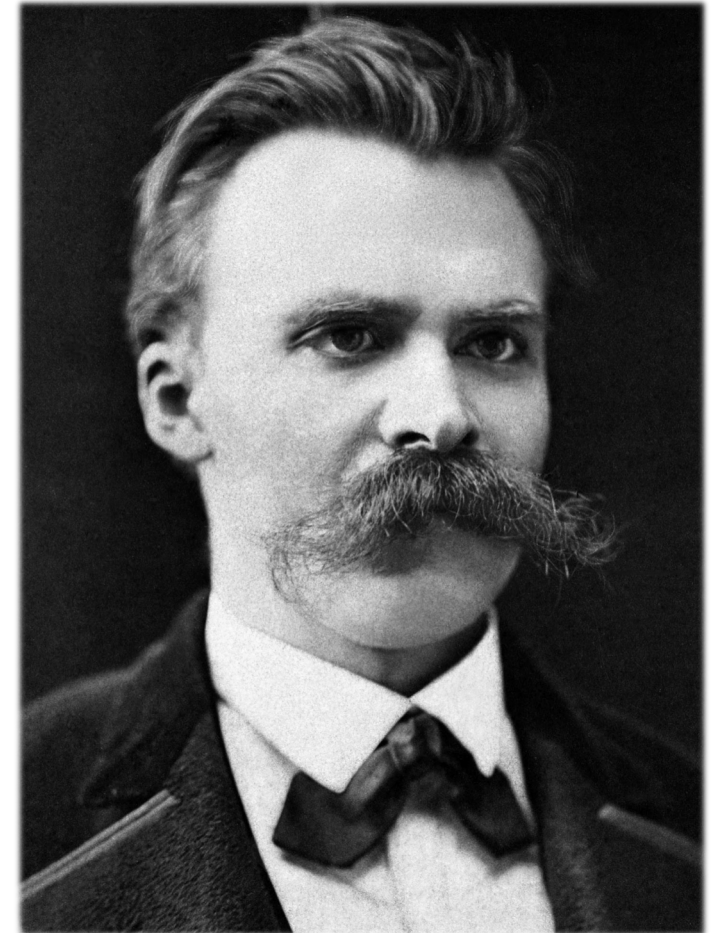
*The Gay Science* §357

Nietzsche is often considered to be one of the 'masters of suspicion' (in such company as Marx and Freud). **For him, truthfulness kills God, the source of ... Truth!**

**So: what, then, of his claim about the 'end' of Christianity?**

**To what extent are we witnessing this decline today, in our anxiety over a 'post-truth' world?**

**And: to what extent might the intellectual examination of the faith, by the faithful, have *contributed* to this so-called decline?**



Jean-François Lyotard: Resistance  
to Metanarratives

3

## Lyotard: Resistance to Metanarratives

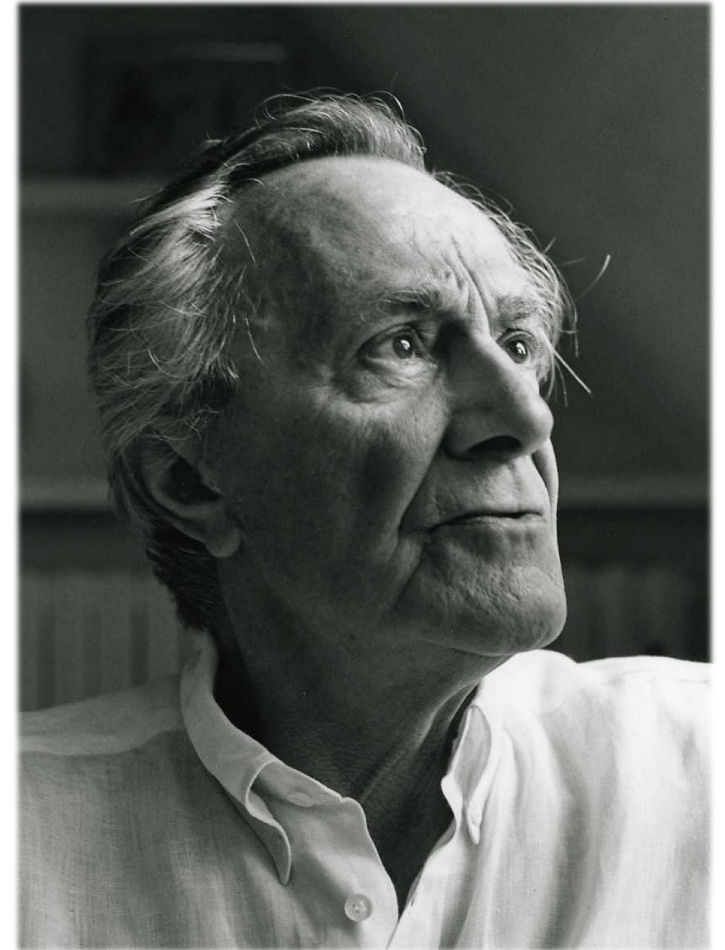
Lyotard (1924–1998) was one of the most influential intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps his most influential book was *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979).

The important point from Lyotard's short but dense text is his argument that the epoch of what he terms (in French) the 'grand narrative', also known as the 'metanarrative', is coming to an end.

Metanarratives serve to bind knowledge, and ultimately communities, into coherent, purposive unities. Loosely conceived, a metanarrative affective untold millions of person is that of the Christian faith – by which, as we have seen, the problem of existence might not only be endured, but transfigured into joy and thanksgiving.

As Nietzsche warned, how might we cope with existence in the wake of the decline and failure of the Christian means of transfiguring our pain?

**Is there a link between the 'postmodern condition', and a 'post-truth' society?**



# Fake News, Post-Truth: A Landscape of Challenge

# 4

## A Landscape of Challenge

Immediately behind this fake news, post-truth issue, of course, is Donald Trump.

This seems self-evident – it is because of Trump that we are here, talking about this, today.

And for good reason. From the run-up to his 2016 win over Hilary Clinton, and the commencement of his presidency in January 2017, Trump has dominated the news for a series of deeply concerning reasons.

Just one example, that of ‘alternative facts’.

- This emerged from Trump’s claims regarding the size of the crowd as his inauguration, namely, that his crowd was larger than either of Barak Obama’s.
- Photographic evidence disputed this claim, but an aide described the Trump claim as the presentation of ‘alternative facts’.
- The counter to this, from many, that there are no such things as ‘alternative facts’ – the ‘alternative’ to a fact being a falsehood – was dismissed by the White House.

This is just one example of many. Another, more pernicious, is Trump’s repeated description of the media, or sections of it, as the **‘enemy of the people’**.



**Donald J. Trump** ✓  
@realDonaldTrump

The Mainstream Media has never been as corrupt and deranged as it is today. **FAKE NEWS** is actually the biggest story of all and is the true **ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE!** That's why they refuse to cover the REAL Russia Hoax. But the American people are wise to what is going on.....

9:20 PM · May 20, 2019 · Twitter for iPhone

7.8K Retweets 26K Likes



**Kim Mercier** @kmercier · May 22

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

You have that backwards. To most sane Americans you are the true enemy of the American people. Is it 2020 yet? We want to Make America Great Again by voting you out of office! Can't wait to hit the ballot box! 🇺🇸

1 6



**Hope** @hopebevers · May 22

Replying to @realDonaldTrump and @AZWS

Most of us knew what was going on with MSM from the moment you were elected. Keep up the great work you're doing for all Americans 🇺🇸 🇺🇸 🇺🇸

1 2

1 more reply



**Adrana West** @WestAdrana · May 30

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

Amen!!! This is a scary time. I never thought America would have Leaders who would want our Country to be a Socialism Gov. at 77 I am so ready for Jesus to return. THERE WILL BE ALOT OF PEOPLE SHOCKED WHEN THAT HAPPENS. IT WILL HAPPEN ONE DAY.

1 1



**Rachel Wolf** @iamRachelWolf · May 22

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

#Unhinged

1

## A Landscape of Challenge

There are numerous other examples of Trump attacking the press.

Beyond that, his comments are so often filled with inaccuracies that websites have been set up to keep track of them. Today, truth is a contested item of (at least part of) the human world.

The Internet, in particular, has accelerated the extent to which individuals and groups can discuss ideas contrary to accepted facts and perspectives, and disseminate their own interpretations of events – often with less than coherent results ... but in some cases with a remarkably large audience willing to absorb most or all that is said.

From certain points of view, the world is an increasingly paranoid, critical, unsure, suspicious place.

This is a serious phenomenon. A coherent and abiding sense of reality, of truth being a thing of substance in our lives, seems essential to normal psychological health, as well as to social and political relations.

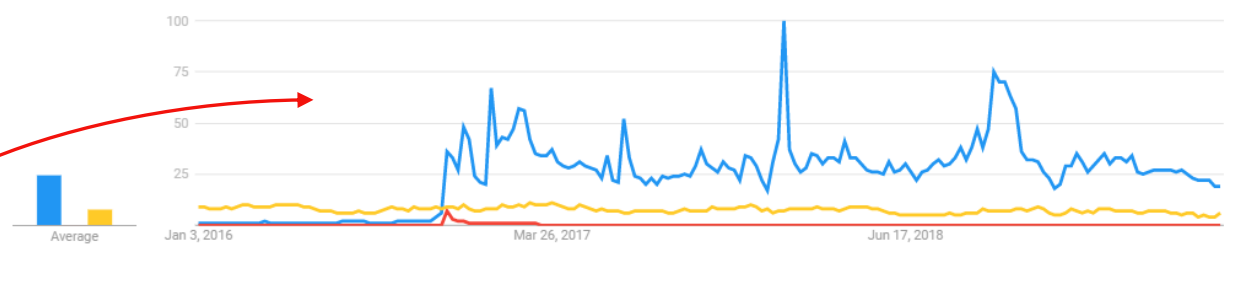
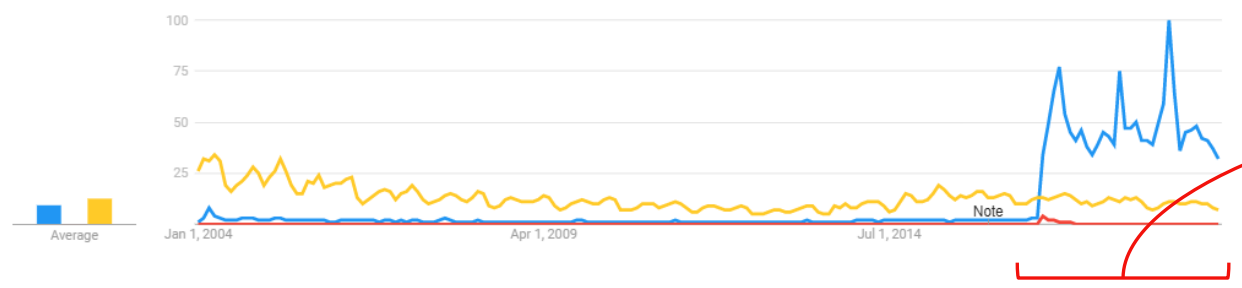
However. To what extent is any of this new? To what extent is the idea of fake news genuinely new in the world? Haven't lies, deception and falsehood always been a reality between humans?

**Further: to what extent might the issue of 'fake news' and a 'post-truth' society be a product of the echo chamber of the Twitterverse, of the Academy, and of journalistic and political discourses?**



Search term: "fake news" (circled in red), "post-truth", "postmodern".  
Worldwide | 2004 - present | All categories | Web Search

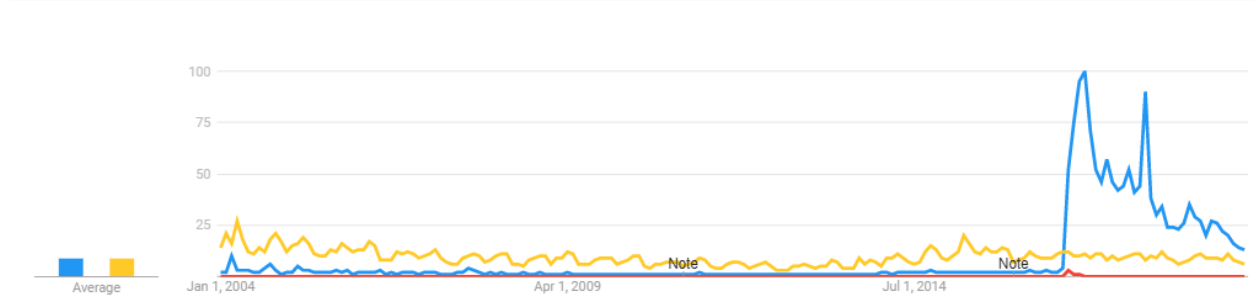
Search term: "fake news" (circled in green), "post-truth", "postmodern".  
Worldwide | 1/1/16 - 7/30/19 | All categories | Web Search



● "fake news" Search term  
● "post-truth" Search term  
● "postmodern" Search term  
+ Add comparison

United States 2004 - present All categories Web Search

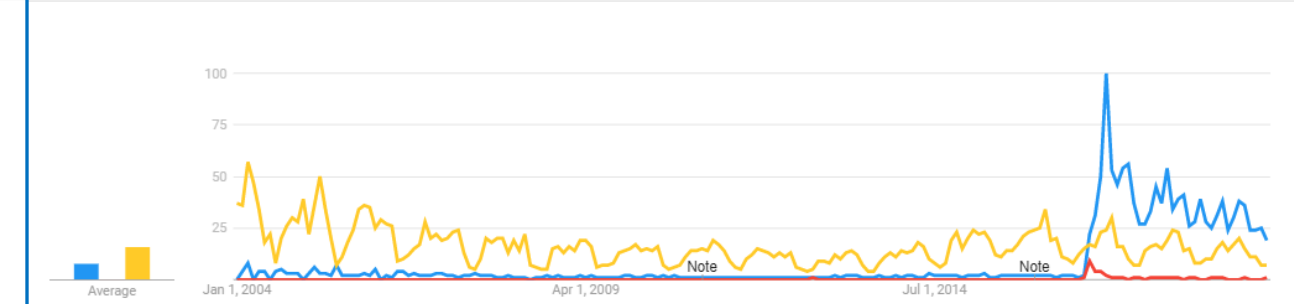
Internet over time ?



● "fake news" Search term  
● "post-truth" Search term  
● "postmodern" Search term  
+ Add comparison

United Kingdom 2004 - present All categories Web Search

Internet over time ?



● "fake news" Search term   ● "post-truth" Search term   ● "postmodern" Search term   + Add comparison

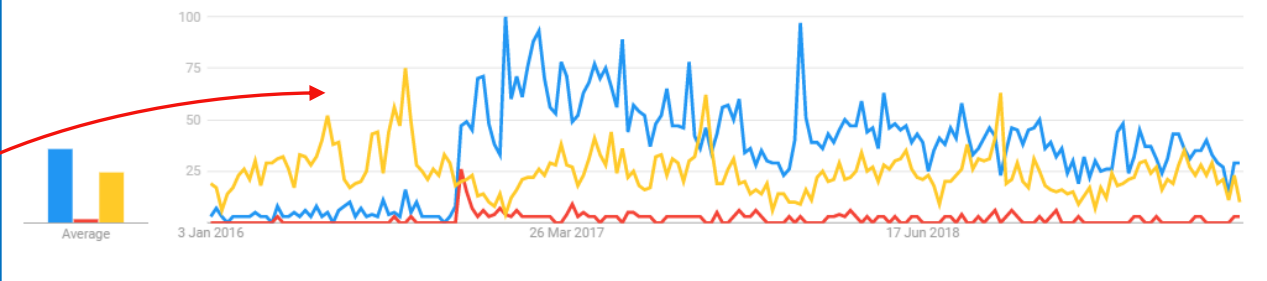
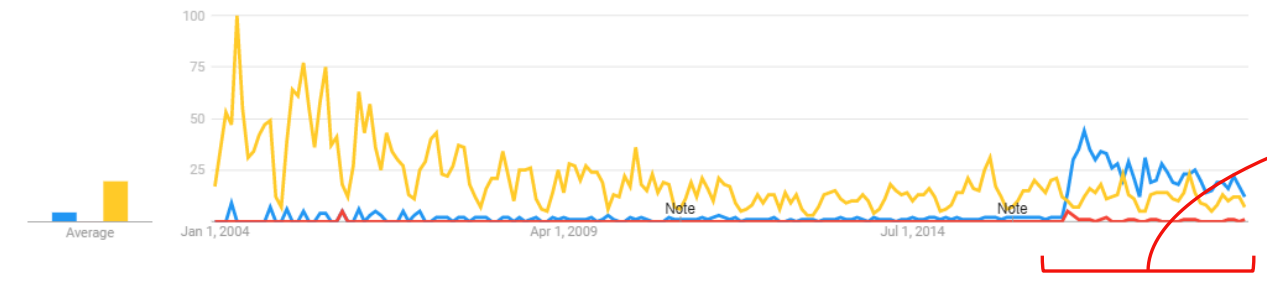
Australia   2004 - present   All categories   Web Search

Interest over time

● "fake news" Search term   ● "post-truth" Search term   ● "postmodern" Search term   + Add comparison

Australia   01/01/2016 - 30/07/2019   All categories   Web Search

Interest over time



● "fake news" Search term   ● "post-truth" Search term   ● "postmodern" Search term   + Add comparison

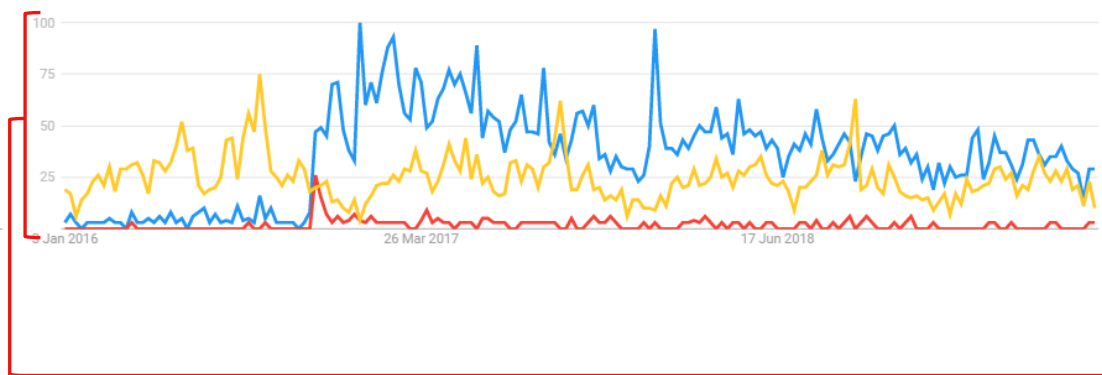
● "fake news" Search term   ● "post-truth" Search term   ● "postmodern" Search term   ● "god" Search term   +

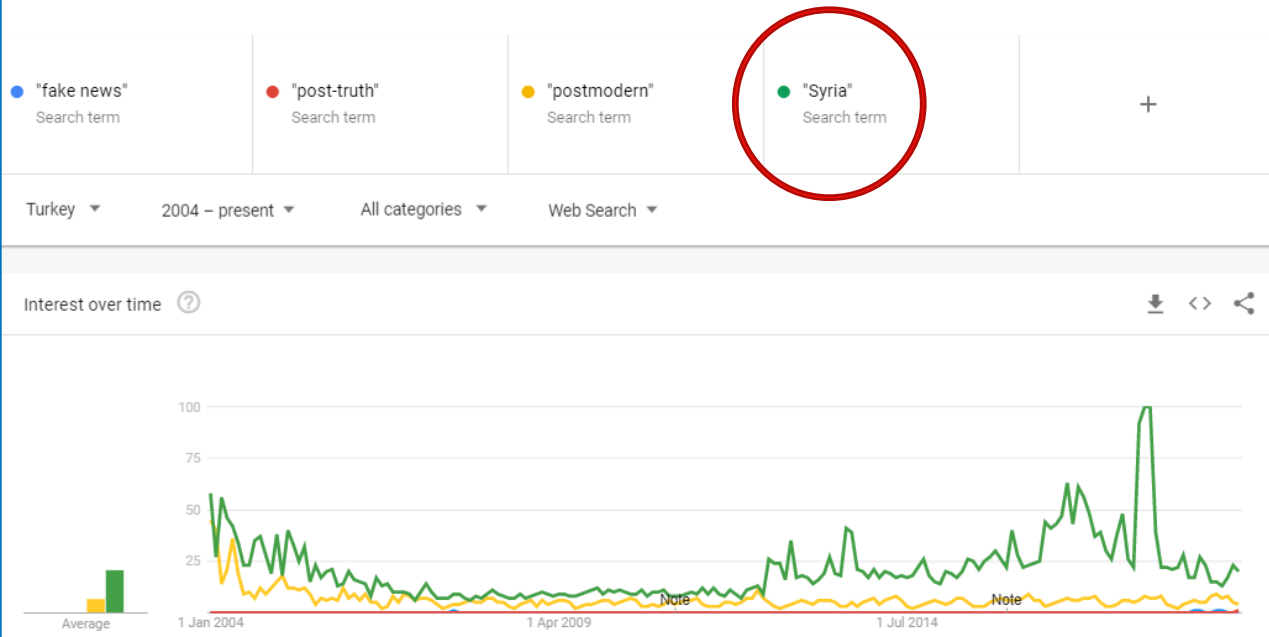
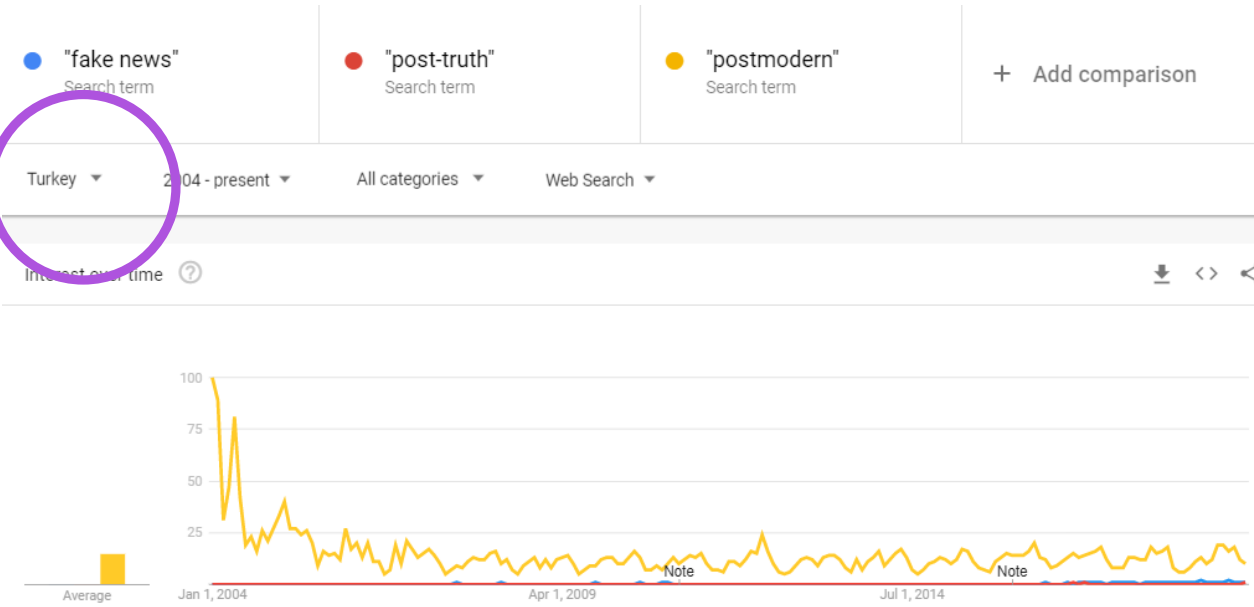
Australia   01/01/2016 - 30/07/2019   All categories   Web Search

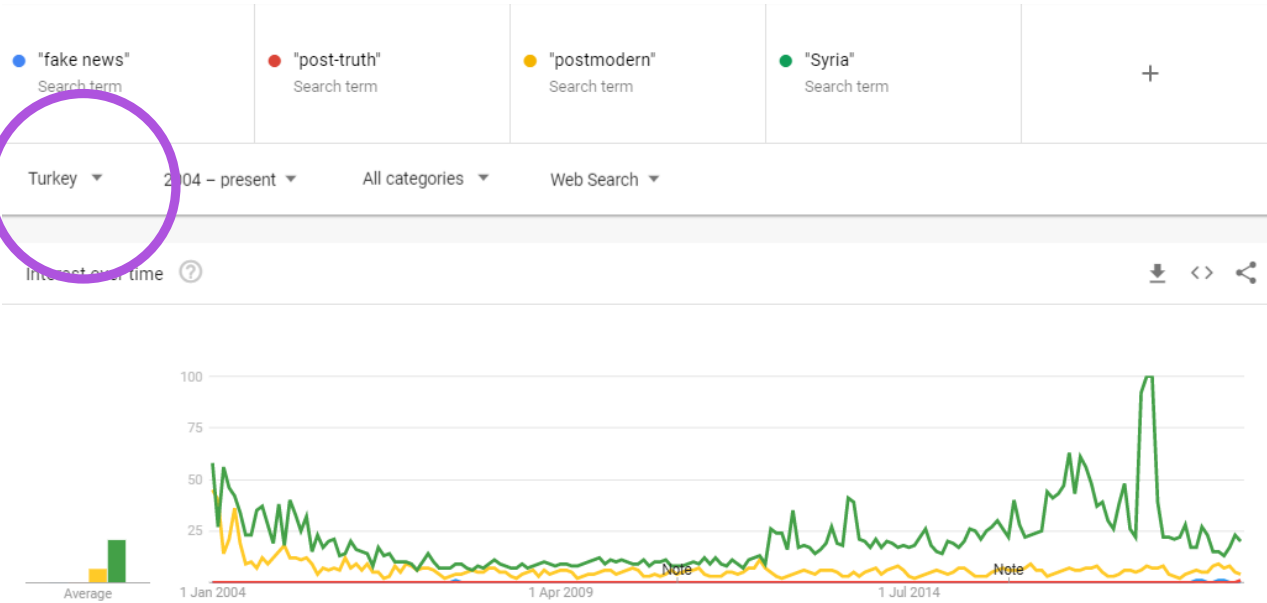
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Interest over time ?   [Download] [Zoom] [Share]

Interest over time ?   [Download] [Zoom] [Share]







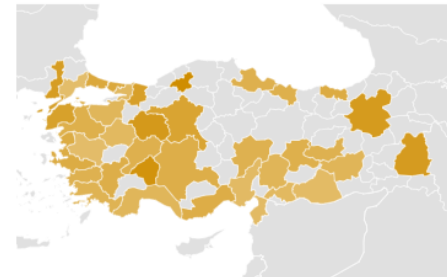
### Fake News

Interest by sub-region ? Sub-region [dropdown] [menu] [download] [left] [right] [share]



### Postmodern

Interest by sub-region ? Sub-region [dropdown] [menu] [download] [left] [right] [share]



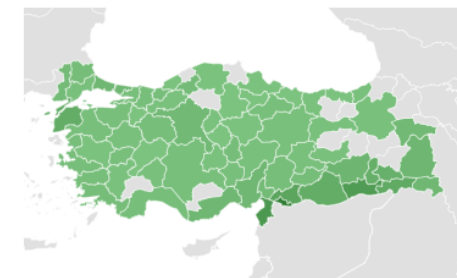
### Post-Truth

Interest by sub-region ? Sub-region [dropdown] [menu] [download] [left] [right] [share]



### Syria

Interest by sub-region ? Sub-region [dropdown] [menu] [download] [left] [right] [share]



**N.B.:** Not a localised phenomenon; e.g. add 'olives' to the data for Israel ... !

Conclusion: Liability / Opportunity

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