



# EPIPHANY

SEARCH ENGINES, SOCRATES, AND DEMONS



Compliments of the  
Miller Summer Youth Institute at  
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary

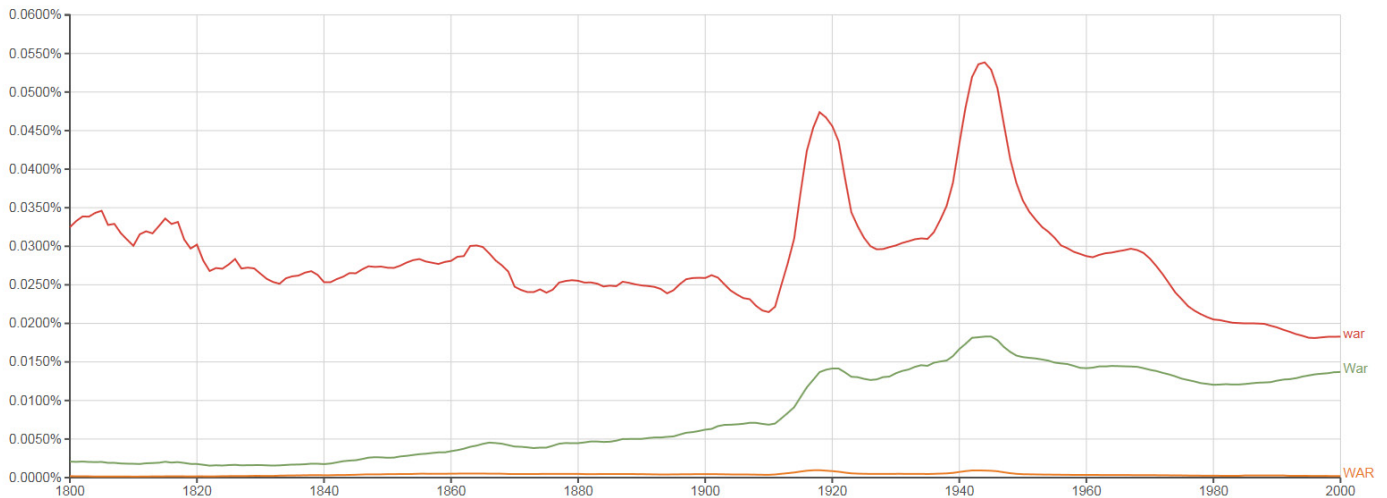
# EPIPHANY – SEARCH ENGINES, SOCRATES, AND DEMONS

The Rev. Derek Davenport '05/'17, Director of the Miller Summer Youth Institute

## USING “EPIPHANY”

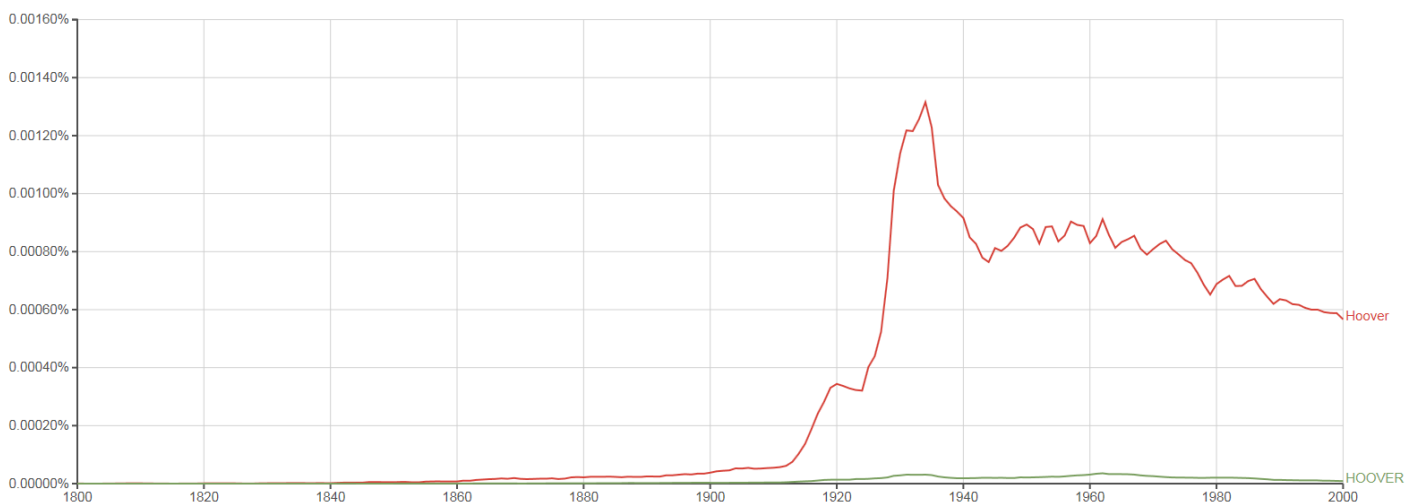
The word “epiphany” has become pretty popular in recent years. We use it to mean a flash of insight or a moment that changes our perspective. It appears in books, movies, poems, and song lyrics—and has done so increasingly over the last few decades.

To demonstrate our increasing use of the word “epiphany,” Google’s NGram Viewer can offer some data. NGram Viewer is a tool that searches the millions of books in the Google Books database for the frequency a given word appears in published books.<sup>1</sup> To get some context for the tool, consider the word “War.”



Look at the spikes. World War I took place roughly between 1914 and 1918, World War II between 1939 and 1945, and the Vietnam War between 1955 and 1975. As the world was plunged into conflict, we wrote books about or referring to war. You’ll notice that NGram can track each capitalization variant. Both “war” and “War” peak during each of those three periods.

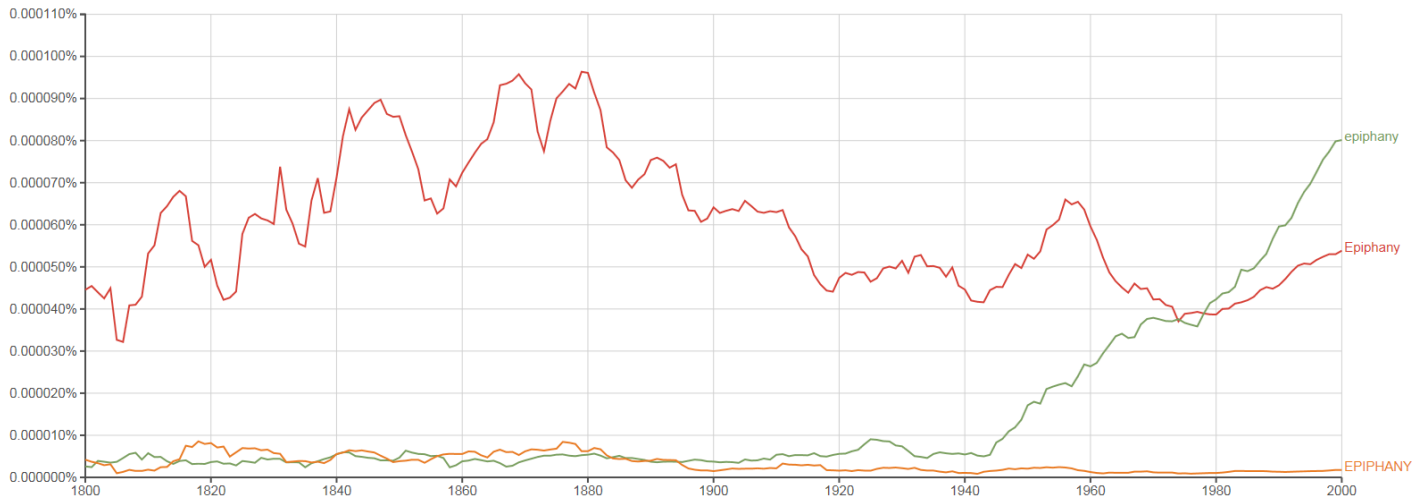
For another example, look at the use of the name of a United States President. So as to steer clear of current political conversations, let’s go with someone from almost a century ago. Look at the use of the word “Hoover” in print.



<sup>1</sup> To play with the tool yourself, check it out at <http://books.google.com/ngrams>.

Keep in mind that Herbert Hoover was the president of the United States from 1929 to 1933. The use of the word “Hoover” peaks during his presidency but then never returns to the near zero levels of the 1800s, as subsequent books about presidents (or history, or dams) have to mention his name. But notice that the climb begins even earlier . . . and coincides with the 1908 purchase of the patent for the first upright vacuum cleaner by a man named—you guessed it—Hoover!

Hopefully, these examples demonstrate clearly how the tool works. So to get a handle on how we use the word “epiphany,” we can plug it into the NGram Viewer to see the frequency with which published books use variations of the word. Here’s what we find.



Right away, a few facts jump out. For one thing, only a very small fraction of a percentage of books use any variation of the word “epiphany.” Remember, though, that the database contains millions of publications—even a tiny fraction can represent hundreds of books. In fact, NGram Viewer won’t even register a word if it appears in fewer than 40 books.

With this scope in mind, two trends are noteworthy regarding our word “epiphany.” The first trend is that, despite the word’s somewhat consistent usage over time, there is an apparent decline in the use of “Epiphany” (capital “E”) over the last 100 years. But NGram Viewer has some flaws, one of which may be an artificial deflation of religious terminology in more recent decades based on the changes in the genres of books now published; so the decline in the appearance of “Epiphany” (pun intended!) may not be as steep as it appears.<sup>2</sup>

**“Epiphany” comes from a Greek word with several possible translations. The simplest English equivalents range from “appearance” to “revelation” to “illumination.” An epiphany “shines a light on,” “reveals,” “makes known,” or “illuminates” something. It causes something to appear.**

But either way, the real change isn’t in the capitalized variant of the word. We’ll come back to this version of it, but for now it’s the lowercased “epiphany” that’s more interesting. The real change appears in the second trend, the tremendous increase in the use of the un-capitalized “epiphany.” Since 1940, its use has increased by about 10 times. If you pick up a book today, you are 10 times more likely to find the word “epiphany” on its pages than you were in the mid-1900s.

### UNDERSTANDING “EPIPHANY”

“Epiphany” comes from a Greek word with several possible translations. The simplest English equivalents range from “appearance” to “revelation” to “illumination.” An epiphany “shines a light on,” “reveals,” “makes known,” or “illuminates” something. It causes something to appear.

<sup>2</sup> The ratio of genres of published works has changed dramatically over the last two centuries. In the 1800s, books of theology and sermons were far more prevalent than scientific journals, books, and papers. As a result, the percentage of books using theological language or jargon in the 19<sup>th</sup> century would be inflated in the NGram study as compared with today. Since the 1800s, that balance has changed dramatically—a change in the ratio of genres that may well contribute to the decline of “Epiphany” in the NGram chart. This article in “Wired” <https://www.wired.com/2015/10/pitfalls-of-studying-language-with-google-ngram/> articulates this particular shift quite well. (If you choose to read it, watch out for some vulgarity.)

Why has the concept become so popular in the last few decades? There could be thousands of specific explanations. For the moment, let's focus on two broad possibilities.

First, perhaps we're having more of them. I don't mean that we are literally having more "revelations," but perhaps we are more likely to categorize insights that we have, flashes of inspiration or brilliance, as "epiphanies" than we used to be. Something in our current context resonates with the concept of "epiphany" and the mystical connotations it has acquired.

The link between inspiration and the supernatural isn't new. Words such as "genius" are historically connected to a kind of guardian "spirit"—like an Arabian genie! In Plato's *The Apology of Socrates*, Socrates talks about hearing from a "daimon"—a sort of supernatural messenger. Even the word "inspiration" has its roots in concepts of spirit and divine breath.



David's "The Death of Socrates" 1787

The link between insight and "light" is also an old one. We use concepts such as "brilliant" to mean "very smart." We talk about "light-bulb" moments—and sometimes even double dip by talking about "flashes of brilliance." Even the word "insight" relies on the concepts of "seeing."

But these concepts are tricky. Even though we have lots of ways to describe our "Aha!" moments, what do you say after you've had one? "I had a stroke of genius" sounds arrogant. So does "I had a flash of brilliance." "I had a daimon moment" might get you in trouble. "I had a light-bulb moment" works, but only if you happen to live in a cartoon.



So what do we say? Maybe what we say now is, “I had an epiphany.” It picks up both the concepts of divine inspiration and of light, and it resonates with our current context. It sounds less arrogant than calling yourself brilliant, while still acknowledging that you had a good thought. It sounds less mystical than claiming you’ve heard from a divine messenger, while still acknowledging that somehow an idea came from outside your own mind.

So maybe we use the word much more today because it fits better with our current context. To put it another way, maybe we have more of them—more epiphanies.

Or maybe it’s the opposite.

Maybe we don’t have more epiphanies. Maybe we have fewer. Not that we don’t have as many moments of brilliance or “genius” ideas, but maybe we have fewer moments in which we feel like we’ve truly encountered a divine revelation.

We’ve all lost track of the number of articles, books, blogs, and status updates about things like “secularization” and “nones” and any number of other terms that all mean roughly the same thing. Culturally, we seem to feel farther from God than we have in a long time.

Maybe that’s why we use the word epiphany. Not because we experience it, but because we yearn to experience it. We want a connection to something outside ourselves, beyond our normal, everyday lives. Maybe using “epiphany” is an attempt to reach for God with our language. Maybe we categorize so many experiences as epiphanies not because we truly have them, but because we long for them.

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What to do?

For whatever reason, today we talk about epiphanies more than we did in the past. So what should we do with that fact? As Christians, we should embrace it!

There is something in our cultural language that resonates with Christian tradition. The concept of divine revelation is becoming a more consistent part of our cultural identity and language. The prevalence of “epiphany” provides a wonderful point of connection between our tradition, our liturgy, our theology, and the world around us. People are seeing, hearing, reading, writing, and speaking this word, and followers of Christ, by faithfully practicing our own tradition, can provide depth and context for the “epiphanies” people experience in our world.

It’s important for us as Christians to connect to the “epiphanies” around us. It’s important if the people around us have more divine encounters than they did before. It’s even more important if the people around us yearn for more of such encounters with God.

## **RETAKING THE CAPITAL**

So how do we highlight the connection between this cultural phenomenon and Christian tradition? Maybe the NGram Viewer has a hint for us here as well.

The word that’s on the rise is “epiphany”—lowercase “e.” The common noun, the un-capitalized version, is the word that refers to a revelation or an inspiration. The proper noun, the capitalized version of the word, means something slightly different.

Capitalized, “Epiphany” refers not to a generic revelation but to the revelation of Jesus to humanity, the appearance of God in the flesh to the world. Depending on your tradition, “Epiphany” occurs either at the baptism of Christ or when the Magi arrived to visit him. Both events have come to signify moments when the identity of Jesus was revealed to humanity, and both are typically celebrated on January 6,<sup>3</sup> 12 days after Christmas. They are moments of divine inspiration, flashes of heavenly brilliance when people like us recognized God.

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<sup>3</sup> Or January 19<sup>th</sup>, in churches that follow the older, unrevised Julian calendar

By proclaiming and celebrating Epiphany, perhaps we can gently provide deeper context for a term that has found new life in our own culture. Perhaps we can point people in a productive direction as they yearn for the connection to God signified by a linguistic trend.

There are lots of ways we could work to renew the use of terms such as “Epiphany.” Personally, I just like telling the story of the Magi every chance I get. Others may prefer to extend Advent devotionals into January. Some celebrate “Three King’s Day” or preach about Jesus’ baptism. However you choose to do it, consider using the word “Epiphany.” Help the people around you connect their language about God to the scriptures that reveal Jesus—God in the flesh.

## MILLER SUMMER YOUTH INSTITUTE AT PITTSBURGH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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Learn more:

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