

Summit 2026 Opening Talk

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Welcome everyone to the 2026 North American Unitarian Association, NAUA Summit. Our theme is reimagining liberal religion. Not liberal in the political sense, but liberal in the classic Enlightenment sense. I see the NAUA as a standard bearer and backbone for liberal religion. NAUA's foundational principles are freedom, reason, and tolerance; values that have moved civilization forward over the past half-millennium. This summit will explore those ideals and whether we can find a better way to express them. We will explore what liberal religion is today, how it has changed, and what we can do about it.

Liberal religion began in the modern era: the Renaissance, the printing press, and the year 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Before the Enlightenment, we had made fitful progress toward a better life. Contrary to popular myth, life was short and brutal in the past with few exceptions. The Enlightenment began (note the importance of "began") the movement toward democracy, freedom of speech, respect for life, the scientific method, and all that we take for granted in our modern world. This marked the beginning of the end of slavery, mass brutality, widespread poverty, early death, and ignorance.

Liberal religion was instrumental in the transition into the modern era, but our ills didn't end in 1517 with the planting of seeds for liberal religion.

There has been a lot of pain paired with the progress made. The American Revolution, the Civil War, and two world wars were but four bloody stepping-stones that brought degrees of progress. The brutality of these transitions gave rise to a protest movement questioning the cost of our progress. The movement has taken over many of our institutions, including academia and churches. This movement is called postmodernism, and its followers see it as a new religion.

Postmodernism has at its core the blurring of reality, and the belief that all our institutions are evil. It sees the world as a struggle between the oppressed and oppressor; our institutions are controlled by those with power; they are oppressive and must be torn down. The belief is that our identity, and who we are, is defined by the group we are part of rather than our actions and beliefs; postmodernism denies our individuality.

Postmodernism also denies the progress made; it has at its core a belief in a utopian ideal that never existed. Since the scientific method is part of the oppressive establishment, it along with logic and reason are part of the problem. Everything we see as "normal", and as being progress, is part of the "water we swim in" and needs to be overturned. Institutions which were liberal religions have largely been taken over by these beliefs, and this led to our founding.

The spark that birthed the NAUA was the forfeiture of those fundamental principles that we believe in. The most obvious was the cancellation of Todd Ekloff, our founder, for offering his views on our religion's direction. While all our principles are important, we are rooted in the belief that we each have a voice to speak our mind, ears to hear the ideas of others, and a mind to consider alternatives. We value each other and respect what their beliefs are; this is fundamental to the NAUA. In that vein, I think this summit is a time for you to hear my thoughts on the NAUA. My views may differ from yours, as I consider myself a cross between a small "c" conservative and a small "l" liberal, agreeing and disagreeing with both sides of the political spectrum. It is not agreement that we look for, but rather the open and respectful exchange of ideas.

The core of democracy is the group we are a part of; that which we can influence and can influence us. Not the identity group defined by gender, race, religion, or other superficial characteristics, but the group we are a part of. We must ask ourselves if we have that today? Do we have a group that acts as a sounding board for our thoughts and a trumpet for the voice of others? Are we at the receiving end of a one-direction communication channel that tells us what to think? Liberal religion at its core, needs to stand for freedom of thought and against authoritarian dogma, just as Martin Luther did when he nailed his 95 Theses to the church door.

The NAUA centers the small group exchange of ideas, and you find it with our circles, services, and academy offerings. This model of democracy is fundamental to our heritage. Maybe the best example of the Enlightenment is Benjamin Franklin, whose "Junto", or "Leather Apron Club" did so much to improve the community. A lot of good came out of these Friday evening get togethers of 12 concerned citizens over a pint of ale and a good meal. Among other things, the Junto established the library, fire department, University of Pennsylvania, and Hospital. It is the coming together of individuals and independent thought that moves society forward, not authoritarian dogma. When I think of my organized church experiences, the thing that I enjoyed most was the coffee hour, and the chance to explore ideas with others. It is in these interchanges that I experienced friendship, growth, spirituality, and humanity. The NAUA model of small groups coming together is what I see as the real future of liberal religion.

I see the NAUA rooted in the ideals of the Enlightenment. Freedom, reason, and tolerance; these have been our motto from the beginning. We believe the world should be better, but we believe in the reality of constraints; we live in a world of constraints; Utopia never existed; "there are no solutions, only trade-offs", Thomas Sowell. Our beliefs led to dissension with those embracing critical social justice; we couldn't come to terms with the idea that virtues such as politeness, agency, hard work, and other qualities that improve one's life are characteristics of one's skin color. We believe that these virtues are not inherent in any group, nor were they the "natural" state of man; they have evolved as society has progressed. The natural state and true history of humanity was a long period of self-preservation, slavery, and brutality, which we have only recently escaped. The world has become more civilized, and today, we enjoy the benefits of greater health, lifespan, and material wealth. Life is still unfair; we still have racism, wars still happen, crime still

exists, the innocent still suffer, and our lives will end. We live imperfect lives in an imperfect world; we in the NAUA strive to make our lives better and the world a better place, but we will do what works, not what has proven false.

Too often, though, our focus has been on the outliers and not the main current of events. Media and algorithms have shortened our attention span and focused it on a false view of events. We hear of injustice and see it as the norm instead of an anomaly. Real problems are overlooked and ignored as they become the way of normal life. We agree with those who wish for a fair world where everyone achieves their highest potential. We believe we can improve things, but we should focus on conserving the progress we have made, recognize that we are fortunate for our advances, and recognize the virtues of society for that progress. We would strengthen rather than destroy elements which have moved us forward and focus on humanity's improvement. Western society is based on the reason of the scientific method; it has developed a moral code of ethics that is the basis of our lives, laws, and institutions; it has moved forward via the empirical evidence of what works and the resourcefulness of millions of people living their lives. We are deeply indebted to those thinkers, institutions, religions, leaders, and individuals whose shoulders we stand on today. We are grateful for what we have inherited and are duty-bound to move it forward.

We believe a life well lived is one of both rights and responsibilities. We know that liberal religion will survive and thrive, by bringing people together, The NAUA, this association, will provide a framework for discussion, discovery, and attainment. The NAUA will do its part; we will hold the line as a truly liberal association.