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## *Letters to a Young Episcopalian: The Scapegoat*

*This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.*

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Dear Anna,

It sounds like you and Marah are finding a lot to talk about. I would have enjoyed your conversations about the violent parts of the Bible and the Qur'an. I'm not surprised that you ended up wanting to edit out those parts.

You're not alone, but the best way forward may be not to ignore the violence in our sacred texts, but understand why it's there.

I don't know enough about how to read the Qur'an to comment on it. You can't just pick up an ancient text and understand what it says. That's the mistake fundamentalists and atheists tend to make.

Every ancient text has to be interpreted, and each religious tradition has developed its own ways of discerning what gets carried forward and what gets left behind.

In our tradition, the violence in our narrative follows a pattern. Recognizing the pattern in the text allows us to recognize it in our lives.

We see that societies often resolve conflict between competing groups by blaming somebody else. Usually, the person is an outsider who is powerful enough to be seen as having caused the conflict, but powerless to defend herself against attack. Get rid of the scapegoat and you get rid of the conflict. After all, it's better to kill the scapegoat than to kill each other. And, in uniting against the scapegoat, the competing groups come together.

The Bible illuminates this pattern by giving voice to scapegoats and refusing to accept that they were, in fact, at fault.

Read this way, the violent texts are our key to understanding that God calls us to stand with the victim and to form community in a different way.

You and Marah might think about whether you see this pattern playing itself out in the current political debates.

I would also be interested to know if it helps Marah explain any of the violent parts of the Qur'an.

Your affectionate uncle,  
Ames