A humanist perspective on…the 'Golden Rule'

All societies and religions have moral principles, laws and rules. Although many of the less important rules vary, all traditions seem to have come up with a version of "the Golden Rule", "Do as you would be done by" or "Treat other people in a way you would like to be treated yourself" - there are more examples below. It can be expressed positively (as above) or negatively ("Do not treat others as you would not like to be treated yourself"). Some people think that the negative versions are better, because it is easier to agree on the things we would not like, and anyone can work out what would cause suffering to themselves or another person and then avoid doing it. For example, you wouldn't want to be bullied, so you shouldn't bully other people.

The Golden Rule requires kindness and care for the less fortunate, because this is what we would want in their situation, and it discourages actions like lying and theft because no one wants to be lied to or to have their property stolen. It is simple and clear, and works well in practice.

Humanists seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. They use reason, experience and respect for others when thinking about moral issues, not obedience to dogmatic rules. They are impressed by the fact that we find this very useful basic principle everywhere. It appears to be based on our common humanity, using our need to be treated well by others and our aspiration to live harmoniously with others as its foundation. It can be worked out by anyone, anywhere, by thinking about our understanding of ourselves and other people. It does not need to be given to us by sacred texts or a god.

Questions to think about

- Draw a line from each version of the Golden Rule to the place it comes from on a map of the world.
- Why do you think so many different cultures have come up with something so similar?
- Do you think the Golden Rule is enough on its own?
- Would it stop people lying or stealing or killing people?
- If people followed it, would they always do the right thing?
- If they disobeyed it, would they tend to do bad things?
- Would the world be a better place if everyone, including world leaders, obeyed the Golden Rule?
- What are rules for?
- Think about your family rules. (They may not be written down but most families have some "rules" - like "Everybody makes their own bed"). What are they for? Are they based on the Golden Rule?
- Think about school rules - what are they for? Are any of them based on the Golden Rule?

- What are good manners for? Are they anything to do with the Golden Rule?
- If you were only allowed one school rule, what would you choose?
- What should you do when people break the Golden Rule?
- If you ruled the world for a day, what rule or rules would you establish to make the world a better place?

Examples of the 'Golden Rule' from around the world

(The BHA also produces a poster with more examples, available by telephoning 020 7079 3580.)

"He should treat all beings as he himself should be treated. The essence of right conduct is not to injure anyone." (JAINISM -
from The Suta-Kritanga, about 550 BCE*)

"Do not do to others what you would not like for yourself."
(CONFUCIANISM - from The Analects of Confucius, about 500 BCE)

"I will act towards others exactly as I would act towards myself."
(BUDDHISM - from The Siglo-Vada Sutta, about 500 BCE)

"This is the sum of duty: Do nothing to others Which, if done to you, could cause you pain." (HINDUISM - from The Mahabharata, about 150 BCE)

"What you would avoid suffering yourself, seek not to impose on others." (ANCIENT GREECE - Epictetus, the Greek philosopher, about 90 CE*)

"Love your neighbour as yourself." (JUDAISM / CHRISTIANITY - Leviticus 19, in The Torah, about 400 BCE, quoted by Jesus in Matthew 22 and Mark 12, 1st Century CE)

"What is harmful to yourself do not do to your fellow men. That is the whole of the law…" (JUDAISM - from Hillel: The Talmud, about 100 CE)

"None of you truly believes, until he wishes for his brothers what he wishes for himself." (ISLAM - a saying of The Prophet Muhammad, 7th Century CE)

"As you think of yourself, so think of others." (SIKHISM - from Guru Granth Sahib, 1604 CE)

One should be *"contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow against himself."* (GREAT BRITAIN -
Thomas Hobbes, English philosopher, 1588-1679 CE)

"He should not wish for others what he does not wish for himself."
(BAHA'I from the writings of Baha'u'llah, about 1870 CE)

"You should always ask yourself what would happen if everyone did what you are doing." (FRANCE - Jean-Paul Sartre, French existentialist philosopher, 1905-80 CE)

"Treat other people as you'd want to be treated in their situation; don't do things you wouldn't want to have done to you."
(British Humanist Association, 1999 CE)

* *BCE* = Before Common Era, equivalent to BC.
  CE = Common Era, equivalent to AD