Anyone with an interest in the philosophy of ethics, or in the common ground between different faiths and cultures, is very likely to be familiar with a dictum known as the “Golden Rule”. Worded in various ways, its straightforward message is to treat other people as you would like to be treated; or to refrain from treating them in a way that you would dislike to be treated.

In this paper, I shall explore the concept as it is expressed within the Islamic tradition, and then outline how the Golden Rule can be applied to great benefit in the broader context of interfaith understanding and dialogue. Before tackling these two subjects, however, the concept and its significance deserve some introductory exploration.

1. WHAT’S SO GOLDEN ABOUT THE GOLDEN RULE?

As mentioned, the Golden Rule is a popular theme in interfaith dialogue. To illustrate this point, the “Charter for Compassion”, initiated by Karen Armstrong in 2008 with the support of a host of religious luminaries, takes the Golden Rule as an expression of its central message. Numerous interfaith websites feature lists of relevant quotations from a multitude of religious traditions.

The reason for its popularity in this field is quite obvious: since emphasising similarity is an important
element of building familiarity and opening the space for dialogue, such an array of statements taken from different scriptures is an attractive illustration of the commonality that binds their adherents.

However, a question can be asked here. Does the value of a principle increase, the more it is repeated in different places? If this is the case, surely there are simpler principles (such as “Do good”) that occur with even greater frequency. Yet it seems that there is something more to the Golden Rule, as though it provides a “rule of thumb” for deciding in what goodness consists.

There are certain types of people to whom such a guideline is likely to prove especially attractive. Some participate in interfaith dialogue apparently seeking a kind of “meta-religion”: for them, coming up with the Golden Rule might feel like cracking the code that underlies all religion. Then there are people who would like to develop a framework of ethics and morality that does not feel the need to cite a deity from time to time.

I should make very clear that I approach the topic from neither of these angles. Even though Islam promotes a universal conception of truth, it does not support the notion that belief systems that contradict each other can all be completely true. Similarly, picking and choosing the appealing aspects of different traditions will be fruitless if not guided by genuine revelation. In the section that follows this one, I begin by articulating a version of the Golden Rule that has very much to do with our human relationship with the divine.

While the Golden Rule is certainly valuable, we should consider whether there is any teaching higher in value. Is there a Platinum Rule, for example? The most obvious candidate to me, as a monotheist, is the commandment to worship God alone. In Islamic teachings, actions of the heart take precedence over actions of the limbs; good deeds, while necessary, are insufficient without sound belief.

Therefore the Golden Rule ought to be qualified, such that we call it “the Golden Rule for dealing with one’s fellow person”. Even then, I feel that the definite article should be changed for an indefinite one, because while it is a golden rule, it is hardly clear that it is the only one. Previously, I questioned whether the frequency with which a principle is stated makes it increase in importance. If I adapt this question to ask whether this frequency increases how true the concept is, then I would have to respond with a resounding “no”. There could be little-known teachings that better get to the heart of wisdom and morality.

Is “doing unto others as you would have them do unto you” a sound and sufficient principle in itself? Philosophers have levelled various
objections, such as the “sadomasochist” counter-example, or pointing out that it fails to take into account differing preferences and situations. The lesson is that this Golden Rule needs to be taken in conjunction with other principles, rather than being considered the basis for all other ethical considerations.

The same could be said for other popular yardsticks such as “not harming others”, while the same negativity is not attached to harming one’s self, or one’s God-given body. If consenting adults can do whatever they please, is divine consent irrelevant? In current debates about human rights, the concept of “rights of God” is not given the same attention, and so on. If too much weight is given to succinct expressions such as the Golden Rule, established principles of religion could be turned on their head, such that things prohibited by the Creator are legitimised.

Coming back to golden rules of ethics, or expressions of the broadest principles of virtue, an example from the Islamic tradition comes to mind. The Prophet Muhammad (on whom be peace) said: “The religion is sincerity.” (Muslim)3 In Arabic, this short statement is in fact two words, each carrying a depth of meaning that is hard to encompass in English equivalents. “The religion” (al-dīn) is better rendered as “the way of life”, specifically the Muslim way of willing submission to God. The concept here described by “sincerity” (al-naṣīḥa) means to intend and perform goodness towards others.

In other words, this narration teaches us to act towards others in the specific way that each deserves. As well as being more succinct than any wording of the Golden Rule, it is also broader in scope, as the Prophet spoke of “acting sincerely to God, His Messenger and His Book”, as well as to the leaders and members of society. It is less clear how I could, for example, treat God as I wish to be treated.4

I have come across the suggestion that Islam does not preach the Golden Rule, with the implication that this casts doubt on its divine origin. If this claim deserves a response, then its logical assumption has already been addressed with this introduction, and what follows will amply demonstrate that Islam does promote this principle.

2. THE GOLDEN RULE IN ISLAMIC TRADITION

An implication that could be taken from some expressions of the Golden Rule is that, by being good to others, good treatment can be expected from those people. Of course, this is by no means a rule. Moreover, some would argue that expecting any sort of reward is contrary to the spirit of kindness. The Qur’an describes the righteous as being keen to help the needy, saying: “We want not from you any reward or thanks.” (Q 76:9)

However, the spiritual life as understood by Muslims is one in which all actions, including those affecting one’s fellow human being, are ultimately for God, and it is from Him that reward is sought. How this understanding compares to the slogan
of “goodness for its own sake” would require its own essay.

Thus one Islamic interpretation of the Golden Rule of human interaction, in conjunction with the ideal of acting solely for God’s pleasure, would say that we should treat others in the way we hope God will treat us, whether in this life or the next. We display those human attributes that reflect the meanings of the divine attributes we hope to be manifested to us in God’s actions, such as mercy, forgiveness, generosity.

The following Qur’anic verse illustrates this meaning clearly:

“Let them pardon and overlook (others’ misdeeds). Do you not love for God to forgive you? And God is forgiving, merciful.” (Q 24:22)

Similarly, the Prophet Muhammad (on whom be peace) taught the following about his Lord:

“The merciful will be treated with mercy by the Most Merciful. Be merciful to those on earth, so that He in Heaven will be merciful to you.” (Al-Tirmidhi)

“Whoever relieves a believer of a trial of this world, God will relieve him of a trial of the Day of Judgment. Whoever provided ease to a person in difficulty, God will provide him ease in this life and the Hereafter. Whoever conceals the faults of a Muslim, God will conceal his faults in this life and the Hereafter. God is at the aid of (His) servant so long as the servant is at the aid of his brother.” (Muslim)

Generally, what I have been describing is the positive side of the Golden Rule (“treat others...”), while the negative side is to say: “Do not treat others in such a way as you would not accept for yourself.” These two aspects complement each other: to accept for others what you reject for yourself is a form of hypocrisy.

The Qur’an has a chapter dedicated to condemning the “defrauders”, whose crime is that:

“When they take a measure from people, they take in full; but when they give by measure or weight to them, they give less than due.” (Q 83:2-3)

In the field of charity, the value of giving away worthless belongings is negated:

“Do not seek out the defective from (your possessions) to spend, while you yourselves would not accept it except turning a blind eye to it.” (Q 2:267)

Instead, we are taught: “You will not attain to righteousness until you spend from what you love.” (Q 3:92)

The true believers are those who, being generous to their brethren, “give preference over themselves, even though they are in need” (Q 59:9). This noble preference is not restricted to friends, but is even in response to those who mean you harm: “Repel (evil) by that which is better, and thus the person between him and you was enmity, is as though he were a devoted friend.” (Q 41:34) Do such ethical ideals not take us strides beyond the Golden Rule?
**Love for your brother**

Without doubt, the most famous expression of the Golden Rule from Islamic sources is the following saying of the Prophet (on whom be peace), reported in the Sahih collections of both Al-Bukhari and Muslim, and included as number 13 in Al-Nawawi’s famous Forty Hadiths:

“None of you (truly) believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.”

However, because some people have suggested that the meaning of this statement is less than universal, saying that it only applies to fellow Muslims, I feel it worthwhile to clarify some issues related to the tradition.

First, this citation – like some, not all, of those above – makes reference to one’s “brother”. In this context, it is never interpreted as meaning a male sibling, but is understood to mean fellow Muslims of either gender. If its sense can be extended that far, then it is reasonable to consider even broader senses of brotherhood in the Islamic understanding.

True, those who ascribe to the Islamic creed – particularly, testifying to the Oneness of God and believing in Muhammad as the last of God’s prophets and messengers – form a single fraternity of faith, as declared in the Qur'an: “The believers are but brothers.” (Q 49:10) This brotherhood entails numerous duties over and above those due to people not belonging to the faith. However, nothing in that negates wishing the same good for one's neighbours as for one's self and religious community.

Indeed, there is a broader concept of brotherhood entailed by the common ancestry – from Adam and Eve – of humanity in all its places and races: “O mankind, indeed We created you from a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another.” (Q 49:13) Prophets are sometimes described in the Qur'an as “brother” to their people, even if they were unrelated by blood – at least in its more direct sense.

The implication of this “brotherhood in humanity” is that the above-quoted saying of Muhammad (peace be upon him) could be understood as saying that one should love for his brother-human, as well as his brother-Muslim, what he loves for himself. Someone might object that the latter meaning, brotherhood in faith only, is more apparent in the wording of the narration. Therefore, it is worth mentioning a number of similar narrations worded differently.

Imam Ibn Rajab Al-Hanbali narrates a plethora of related narrations in his commentary, one of which reads: “A servant does not reach the reality of faith until he loves for the people the good that he loves for himself.” (Ahmad) He also mentions the Prophet's saying (peace be upon him) to his companion Abü Hurayra: “Love for people what you love for yourself, and you will be a believer.” (Ibn Maja)

Similarly, in Sahih Muslim is an exhortation to pay attention both to the rights of God and to the rights of people: “Whoever wishes to escape the...
Hellfire and enter Paradise, then let him be a believer in God and the Last Day when death comes to him, and let him treat people in the way that he likes to be treated.”

These narrations all apparently refer to people in general, rather than Muslims in particular. Even if it can be argued that the primary meaning intended, or the most worthy of priority, is one’s brother or sister in faith, to claim that the Prophet (on whom be peace) only meant for this Golden Rule to extend to fellow Muslims would require proof.

Indeed, we find support in traditional scholarship for the view that loving good for people is universal. For example, Imam Al-Nawawī states in his commentary that “it is best to interpret this as the broadest sense of brotherhood, such that it encompasses both non-Muslims and Muslims.” Underlining the intimate link between faith and character in Islamic teachings, he notes that perfect faith is not attainable except by struggling against lowly impulses such as jealousy, until a person loves to see others enjoying God’s blessings as much as – if not more than – he loves this for himself.

Outer and inner reform

As well as being a guide to everyday relations with other people, the Golden Rule can also have wider implications. As well as material things, it applies to good treatment. As well as the things of this world, it affects spiritual realities. As well as individuals, it is relevant to societies.

For example, if I want for myself to attain God’s pleasure – my highest desire – through faith and good deeds, I similarly make an effort to advise my fellow Muslims with whatever knowledge I have, and example I can set. In so doing, I am demonstrating love and care for others, and indeed seeking divine reward in the process, as the Prophet (on whom be peace) said: “One who guides to a good action is like the one who performs it.” (Al-Tirmidhī)

Evidently, this extends to loving goodness for those who do not share my beliefs. If faith is the most precious thing that I possess, and the gift for which I am most grateful to God, then it stands to reason that I demonstrate both my gratitude and my love for humanity by inviting others to His way. If that is genuinely my attitude, then it will be manifested by my using wisdom and gentleness, hoping sincerely that God opens the hearts to the truth.

The principle also has uses in reforming one’s character and overcoming the temptations of this life. The following account from the life of Muhammad (peace be upon him) illustrates the effectiveness of the Prophetic method of reforming people by appealing to both their hearts and their minds.

A young man, overcome with desire to commit fornication, came seeking dispensation to carry it out. The Prophet sat him down and asked him, in turn, “Would you like that for your mother? For your daughter? Your sister, your aunts?” Each time, the man swore by God that he would hate for his relative to be exploited in that way. The Prophet said: “Likewise, people do not
like that for their mothers, daughters, sisters or aunts.” He then made a prayer for the young man, whose mind and heart were thus freed from their attraction to this sin.  

Imam Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, one of the giants of Islamic history in the field of character and spirituality, listed four means to discover one’s personal flaws. One is to sit before a wise teacher who has expertise and insight into matters of the soul. The second is to keep the company of true friends who point out where we go wrong. The third is to listen to your enemies – if you have any – because at least then you will be preserved from flattery! The fourth, which is relevant to our study here, is “to mingle with people and attribute to oneself every blameworthy thing which one sees in them... thus one will come to scrutinise one’s own soul and cleanse it of everything one finds blameworthy in others. This constitutes the highest degree of self-discipline.”

This could be seen as a reversal of the Golden Rule: “dislike for yourself what you dislike for others”, which, in a context such as this, is wise in its own right. At the same time, we can see it as a true application of the Golden Rule, in that we wish for others to encounter us in as good a state as we would like to encounter them. If I like smiling faces, I should like for others to find me smiling. If I dislike quick-tempered people, I should also dislike for other people to be subjected to the quickness of my temper. Al-Ghazālī astutely emphasises the importance of this principle, saying:

“We were all people only to renounce the things they dislike in others, they would not need anyone to discipline them. Jesus (upon whom be peace) was once asked, ‘Who taught you?’ ‘I was taught by no-one,’ he replied. ‘I perceived the ignorance of the ignorant man, and avoided it.’”

3. A GOLDEN APPROACH TO DIALOGUE

We could summarise the above Ghazalian formulation of the Golden Rule by saying: “Learn from how others mistreat you”. By reflecting on those things that displease us in our interactions with other people, we can list and address those things in our own attitudes and behaviour that could cause similar displeasure in others. Whether or not the behaviour of others is objectively wrong, the fact that you consider it wrong entails a responsibility upon you to abstain from its like. The outcome is an increase in positivity, a perfect pre-emption to the vicious cycle where people who feel victimised go on to abuse others.

I believe that this principle can be very fruitfully applied to the field of inter-religious understanding and dialogue, as I shall illustrate by composing my own list. Taking my cue from things I have found objectionable in various people’s approach to Islam, I have come up with a number of resolutions for my own approach to other faith traditions and communities. It is by no means comprehensive, or immune from
need revision, but it is a starting point.

In presenting the list, I am doing four things. I am articulating a hope for myself; I am drawing attention to some ways that my own religion can be, and is being, misunderstood; I am inviting people to draw up their own lists for their own good; and I am looking forward to reading such contributions, thus gaining insight into how my friends of other faiths would like to be better understood.

**ONE MUSLIM’S INTERFAITH RESOLUTIONS**

1. I will try to understand people’s faiths as they understand them, paying special attention to writings from within the tradition. I might read outsider critiques, but will avoid treating them as though they were primary sources or the final word. I will treat any commentary on religion appearing in the media, especially the most commercial parts of it, with a very healthy measure of scepticism.

2. I will try to engage personally with people of other faiths, to appreciate how their principles are lived in the world. While good character will impress me, I will take care not to judge the religion by the actions of any individual, least of all those who violate its teachings or perpetrate crimes in its name.

3. If studying scriptures and key texts of other faiths, I will do so humbly, remembering that translation is a human effort, and that literacy is more than just deciphering words. I will not rip words from their context in order to prove a point. I will not turn a blind eye to the commentary and explanation that believers have offered to their texts over the centuries.

4. I will not rush to develop theories about a religion based on a few aspects I know about in a superficial way. I will try and keep my prejudices and assumptions in check. I will try to interpret things in the best light, and seek clarification on things that I find troubling.

5. I will not present myself as an expert on someone else’s faith, when there are people who have spent their lives immersed in all things related to it. Yes, I may gain a qualification to speak on various aspects, perhaps more authoritatively than many lay-believers, but I should defer to those who deserve it and consult them when needed. When speaking on another faith, I will represent its positions in a way that I believe its followers would agree to be accurate.

6. I will take care not to impose my own favoured terminology on another faith group, especially where that will breed misunderstanding. I will also strive to understand their terminology and conventions. Above all, I will not judge by names and labels, but look beyond them to concepts and realities.
7. I will not take it upon myself to divide up the followers of another religion into “goodies and baddies”, conflating, in the process, matters of religion with politics, culture, geography and so on. I will not demand of people to renounce any aspect of their religion in order to join the club of acceptability. I will not play the childish game of smearing by association.

8. I will not use sensationalist language to stir controversy. I will not use my “right to offend” – if I have one – to stamp on what others call sacred. I will neither denigrate respected figures of a faith community, nor describe the expression of their religion’s teachings as being “hate speech”, especially when it comes straight from scripture.

9. I will try to take benefit from criticisms of my beliefs, and not jump to accuse those who offer them of bigotry and malign intent. I will not misrepresent political stances that disagree with mine as being attacks on my faith and community.

Finally, I pray to Almighty God for the guidance of others, hoping that His angels will carry my supplication, saying all the while: “And for you too.”

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Artwork on Page 1 is by Muhammad Azmeil, illustrating the hadith: “None of you (truly) believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.” Source: www.splart.net

2 This paper was composed to coincide with the 10th Festival of Spirituality and Peace (Edinburgh, August 2010), taking the theme of “The Golden Rule: can we live by it?”

3 Unless otherwise stated, translations from scriptures and scholarly texts are my own. Qur’anic quotations are referenced by (Q chapter:verse), while hadiths are referenced by name of collection.

4 The Qur’an says that “If you support God, He will support you...” (Q 47:7), while a hadith in Al-Tirmidhī promises: “Take care of God and He will take care of you.” However, the correspondence between respective meanings of “support” (naṣr) and “taking care” (ḥifẓ) is necessarily non-literal.

5 Similarly, a hadith in Al-Bukhārī says: “God is only merciful to the merciful ones among His servants.” And on the flip-side: “Verily, God will torment those who torment people in this life.” (Muslim)

6 Jāmi‘ al-‘Ulūm wal-Ḥikam (“Compendium of Sciences and Wisdoms”)

7 From a hadith in Ahmad and Al-Ṭabarāni. See A.F. Abū Ghuddah, “Prophet Muhammad, the Teacher” (Zam Zam Publishers, Pakistan).

8 These quotations are from the excerpt of Iḥyā’ Ulūm al-Dīn (“Revival of Religious Sciences”) published as “Al-Ghazālī on Disciplining the Soul”, translated by T.J. Winter (ITS, Cambridge).

9 According to a hadith in Muslim, the angels echo the supplication of a believer who prays for his brother in his absence.