

HUMANIST SUPPORT DOCUMENT FOR 'RELIGIOUS LITERACY FOR ALL'

STRAND C: LIVING

Lower KEY STAGE 2 (Connecting)

KEY QUESTION L2.9: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM RELIGIONS ABOUT DECIDING WHAT IS RIGHT AND WHAT IS WRONG?

Humanism is above all a secular morality: a set of values that helps us live in a humane way with sensitivity to the needs of others in a community. It is a morality originating from life in this world, a meaningful alternative to any laid down from a supernatural source. This makes it relevant to those without religious faith, who need to be assured that they can lead a good life (bullet point 3) without guidance and support from God. Understanding that you can be good without God will earn respect from those who have religious faith.

Bullet point 1 makes specific reference to 'the golden rule for Humanists' – treat others as you would like them to treat you, and not in ways that neither you nor they would like. This rule is included in all the major world faiths and belief systems. For Humanists the Golden Rule is the only one that really matters: if it is followed it prevents conflict and ensures good relations and happiness, because other people's happiness is as important as our own, and most people appreciate being treated well. More important from a secular viewpoint, the Golden Rule is a natural part of living together in a successful community: not following it leads to aggression and hostility that damages and eventually destroys a community. Here is a natural explanation for understanding right and wrong as thinking, caring beings.

Bullet point 4 The Golden Rule is therefore a basic guideline for good behaviour and helps answer the question in this bullet point about where humanists look for guidance. There are two other sources of guidance in addition to parental guidance. The first is our ability to work out for ourselves the consequences of our actions, often through observing the consequences of the behaviour of others, good and bad – and human beings can be very selfish and bad. The second is our capacity to feel empathy with others, which means that we try not to cause harm to others, feel compassion when we see people unhappy and miserable, and want to help them. The understanding of right and wrong that following these sources of guidance creates is often called our conscience, a sense of right and wrong that we share with most other people. All these are things that young children can understand.

So Humanists have to look into themselves for guidance, but they also draw on assistance from other Humanists, and the inspiration of the writings of people like Epicurus, David Hume, Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, Jeremy Bentham, John

Stuart Mill and Bertrand Russell. Thinkers like these are the sources of wisdom who have established key principles like living a life in harmony with the natural world, working to secure the rights of all men and women, aiming to produce as much happiness as possible by thinking through all possible consequences of action, avoiding doing harm and seeking to improve our world. These principles are universal, but Humanists think they can be applied to changing circumstances perhaps rather better than more detailed commandments.

Bullet point 5 suggests that decisions in difficult situations may be easier for religious people to make than others. Humanists would agree there are difficult decisions to be made, because the balance of outcomes is often very difficult to judge, and there may be unintended consequences. But careful thought in changing circumstances often means that we need to change our opinions and ways of acting. It is not easy for religious believers to do this because of doctrines, so Humanists think that it is they who are in a better position to make difficult decisions!

Bullet point 7 lists all the best qualities in life for discussion: Humanists believe in them all and try to put into effect in their lives, as do most human beings. It is supremely important that RE teaching does not imply that these depend on religious faith. If it does, often by omission of alternative viewpoints, this may explain why many young people reject or grow out of religious faith.

Non-religious and Humanist teaching suggestions and learning activities

- the British Humanist Association's excellent resource for teachers 'Understanding Humanism' has several relevant video clips with worksheets in its Teaching Toolkit 3:

How do Humanists decide what is right and wrong?	several Humanists give the reasons listed in Paragraph 3 above.
The importance of human nature	Philip Pullman suggests that a sense of right and wrong is part of our nature.
What do we mean by behaving well?	Philip Pullman discusses why children in his stories decide to behave well, for example because of the results of being good.
Humanists and the Golden Rule	Philip Pullman introduces and discusses the importance of the Golden Rule.
What is the Golden Rule?	This video clip gives examples of the Golden Rule found in eight faiths and

	belief systems.
What makes something right or wrong?	A short animated series of sketches in which Stephen Fry gives the Humanist view.

- discussion of issues of right and wrong works best through situations as suggested in bullet point 5, especially where there are no clear-cut answers. Some good actions benefit most people but hurt others; some break other good rules; actions against some bad behaviour may have bad results; good actions may hurt you. Some useful scenarios are:

- you have to choose between playing a team game in an important match where you are a key player, or visiting a close friend in hospital just before they have a serious operation. Which do you do?
- a friend asks you what you think of something they are really proud about, but you think it is rubbish. Do you tell them your true feelings or tell a 'white lie'?
- you see a neighbour who is really poor with a large family, a person you don't really like, trying to get some food items for her children through a super market checkout without paying. Do you tell a store detective or say nothing?
- do you join in when some friends of yours say unkind things to a less popular classmate, or stick up for him or her, or say nothing in case you become unpopular too?

How did the group decide? Did the Golden Rule help here? Did religious guidance help? Is one better than the other?

- your children might be able to discuss with you whether they need to have hope of life in Heaven or fear of life in Hell to make them behave well.
- at least one inspirational non-religious person should be added to those in bullet point 6. Nelson Mandela would be an excellent choice: although brought up in a religious school (there were no others available) he made hardly any references to divine guidance or support in his life-long struggle to end the inhumanities of apartheid in his country and end the suffering of his people.