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Religious faith and belief as protective factors against suicide attempt behaviors among the Malaysian prison population

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Abstract: Suicide attempts among prisoners remain a significant mental health concern within correctional institutions worldwide, including in Malaysia. Although previous studies have examined suicide risk among prison populations, limited qualitative research has explored how religious beliefs and spiritual practices function as protective factors against such behavior within multicultural prison settings. This study aims to explore how such beliefs and practices protect against suicide attempts among prisoners in Malaysia. A qualitative descriptive phenomenological approach was employed using semi-structured interviews with 27 prisoners from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds who had previously attempted suicide during their imprisonment. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Four main themes emerged: 1) belief in God, 2) religious ritual practices, 3) positive environmental support, and 4) meaning in life from a religious perspective. The findings suggest that spirituality strengthens emotional resilience and supports suicide prevention among prisoners. The study also highlights the importance of culturally sensitive and spiritually informed rehabilitation approaches within prison institutions.

Keywords: Malaysian prisons; prisoners; protective factors; religious beliefs; suicide attempts

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Introduction

Suicide attempts among prisoners represent a serious global mental health concern and continue to pose significant challenges for correctional institutions worldwide (WHO, 2020). Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that suicide rates within prison populations are considerably higher than those reported in the general community due to the cumulative effects of psychological distress, institutional restrictions, social isolation, and prolonged exposure to stressful prison environments (Fovet et al., 2025; Morgan et al., 2022). Prisoners are frequently exposed to emotional strain associated with imprisonment, including hopelessness, stigma, interpersonal conflict, uncertainty regarding the future, and separation from family support systems, all of which may intensify vulnerability to suicidal behavior (McLennan et al., 2025). In addition, overcrowding, limited personal autonomy, restricted privacy, and inadequate access to mental health support further contribute to emotional dysregulation and psychological instability among prisoners (Goyes, 2025). These institutional and psychosocial stressors collectively increase the likelihood of suicide attempts within correctional settings.

Within the Malaysian context, official data concerning suicide attempts among prisoners remain limited and relatively inaccessible (Hamid et al., 2025). Nevertheless, suicide-related behaviors among prison populations continue to raise concerns regarding the effectiveness of institutional rehabilitation and mental health support systems (Datta et al., 2025). Previous local studies have associated suicidal behavior among prisoners with depression, prolonged emotional distress, feelings of failure, disappointment, and difficulties in coping with prison-related stressors (Yahya & Md. Sham, 2020). Although previous research has examined psychological distress and suicide risk among incarcerated populations, much of the available literature primarily focuses on prevalence rates, criminological factors, and mental health conditions. Comparatively less attention has been paid to understanding the protective psychological mechanisms that may help incarcerated individuals manage suicidal crises, particularly from the perspectives of prisoners who have personally experienced suicide attempts.

In recent years, religious belief and spirituality have received growing research attention as potential protective factors against suicidal behavior. International and local studies suggest that religious commitment may strengthen psychological resilience, enhance emotional regulation, provide existential meaning, and foster hope among individuals experiencing emotional hardship and psychological crises (Hafiz et al., 2025; Robins et al., 2024). Religious practices such as prayer, worship, meditation, and spiritual reflection may also serve as adaptive coping strategies that provide emotional comfort and inner stability during periods of severe psychological distress (Solichah et al., 2025; Teo et al., 2021). For prisoners, religion may serve as an important psychological resource that supports emotional survival and reduces vulnerability to self-destructive behavior within restrictive prison environments (Solomon, 2026).

The protective role of religion can also be understood through several theoretical perspectives. Pargament et al. (2013) argue that religion provides a cognitive and emotional framework through which individuals interpret suffering, develop coping strategies, and construct meaning during adversity. From a sociological perspective, Durkheim's theory, as discussed by Lundskow (2008), suggests that moral integration and social connectedness grounded in religious belief may reduce tendencies toward self-destructive behavior. Within correctional settings, Clear (2000) further explains that religion may function as an internal space for healing among prisoners experiencing guilt, hopelessness, and uncertainty about their future. Collectively, these

perspectives indicate that religious belief may operate as a protective psychological and existential mechanism that helps individuals regulate emotional distress, maintain hope, and reconstruct meaning during suicidal crises.

Despite increasing research interest in religion and suicidal behavior, several important limitations remain within previous studies. Those examining religiosity and suicide prevention have predominantly employed quantitative approaches focusing on statistical associations between religious commitment and suicidal ideation among general, adolescent, or clinical populations (Euseche & Muñoz-García, 2025). Prison-based studies have also primarily emphasized prevalence rates, criminological factors, mental health conditions, and institutional risk factors associated with suicidal behavior among the prison population (Sharma et al., 2025). While these studies contribute important epidemiological and psychological insights, they provide limited understanding of how prisoners themselves interpret and experience religious beliefs and spiritual practices as protective mechanisms during suicidal crises.

Evidence from previous research suggests that religiosity may have a protective role in relation to suicide, although this relationship varies across cultural and religious contexts. A meta-analysis involving nine studies found an overall protective association between religiosity and completed suicide, while also demonstrating substantial variation across cultural settings and population characteristics (Wu et al., 2015). These findings highlight the importance of considering the cultural and religious context when examining the relationship between religiosity and suicidal behavior. Conversely, Hojatitabar et al. (2025) found that greater religious and spiritual struggles were associated with a higher likelihood of suicidal behaviors among Iranian adults. In contrast, greater psychological well-being was associated with a lower likelihood (Fang et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings indicate that the relationship between religion, spirituality, and suicidality is complex and context-dependent, with religious experiences potentially functioning differently depending on their nature, cultural context, and individual psychological experiences.

In addition, previous research has rarely explored the psychological and existential functions of spirituality within multicultural and multireligious correctional environments such as Malaysian prisons. Given that prison populations in Malaysia consist of individuals from diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds, how religious belief influences suicidal behavior may vary according to personal experiences, spiritual interpretations, and institutional contexts (Ibrahim et al., 2024). Furthermore, limited qualitative attention has been paid to understanding how spirituality operates not merely as a religious obligation, but as a lived coping mechanism that assists prisoners in regulating emotional distress, reconstructing meaning, and maintaining psychological resilience following suicide attempts (Uzun & Aslan, 2025).

Evidence from outside correctional settings further underscores the relevance of religious and spiritual factors to suicidal behavior. In a psychological autopsy study conducted in Pakistan, Ali and Saleem (2024) found lower levels of spiritual and religious engagement among suicide cases compared with controls, particularly in relation to participation in religious practices and activities. Their findings highlight the potential relevance of culturally appropriate religious and spiritual approaches to suicide prevention within Muslim-majority contexts. However, existing evidence remains limited in explaining how individuals with lived experiences of suicide attempts perceive and experience religious faith and spiritual practices as protective resources, particularly within multicultural correctional environments.

Therefore, this study contributes a descriptive phenomenological understanding of how religious beliefs and practices function as multidimensional psychological, social, and existential protective mechanisms among prisoners who have experienced suicide attempts within Malaysian prison institutions. By focusing on the lived experiences of suicidal prisoners within a multicultural correctional setting, the study offers a contextually grounded and culturally sensitive contribution to the literature on suicide prevention, spirituality, and prison mental health.

The study contributes to the growing literature on suicide prevention in correctional settings by providing a phenomenological understanding of how religious beliefs and practices function as protective psychological and existential resources among Malaysian prisoners with histories of suicide attempts. In line with Sustainable Development Goal 3, which emphasizes mental health promotion and suicide prevention, as well as Goal 16, which highlights institutional well-being and support for vulnerable populations (Department of Economic and Social Affairs - United Nations, 2023), our study also seeks to provide insights that may support the development of more holistic, culturally sensitive, and spiritually informed intervention strategies within Malaysian prison institutions.

Therefore, the study aims to explore how religious beliefs and practices function as protective factors against suicide attempts among Malaysian prisoners.

Methods

This section outlines the procedures followed in completing the study. It briefly explains the research design, participant selection methods, data collection and analysis processes, and ethical considerations. The following subsections describe these procedures.

Research Design

The study employs a descriptive phenomenological qualitative approach aimed at exploring and understanding the subjective experiences of individuals who have previously attempted suicide while incarcerated. The design focuses on uncovering the essence of the phenomenon, or the core structure of participants' lived experiences (Finlay, 2011). Such an approach was considered appropriate because the study seeks to understand how prisoners consciously interpret and assign meaning to religious beliefs and practices following suicide attempt experiences within prison settings. This approach also requires researchers to practice bracketing, or *epoché* (Laverty, 2003).

Bracketing refers to setting aside researchers' prior knowledge, assumptions, interpretations, and theoretical understanding when examining the phenomenon under study (Laverty, 2003; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Willig et al., 2017). In descriptive phenomenology, this method is essential to preserve the integrity of the findings when analyzing interview data and to accurately reflect participants' lived experiences (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Throughout the data collection and analysis processes for this study, the researcher continuously practiced bracketing by consciously setting aside personal assumptions, previous professional experience, theoretical expectations, and subjective interpretations related to suicide attempts and religious beliefs among prisoners. Reflexive notes and analytic memos were maintained throughout the study to monitor potential researcher biases and ensure that participant narratives remained central during coding, interpretation, and theme development. This process helped preserve the authenticity and integrity of participants' lived experiences within the descriptive phenomenological framework.

Research Participants

Participants were incarcerated individuals who met specific inclusion criteria to ensure the suitability and relevance of the interview data collected. The selection criteria were as follows: 1) individuals who had attempted suicide while in prison, 2) currently serving a sentence in a Malaysian prison, and 3) Malaysian citizens.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, as individuals who had attempted suicide during their time in prison were considered capable of providing meaningful and relevant insights for the study. Participant recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved, when no significantly new meanings, themes, or experiential insights emerged from subsequent interviews. A total of 27 prisoners aged between 24 and 54 took part in the research. They comprised 16 males and 11 females from diverse ethnic backgrounds, Malay, Chinese, and Indian, who practiced various religions, including Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. In terms of educational background, three participants held a Diploma, 20 had completed the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), and four had completed only primary school. Table 1 provides detailed demographic information. Of the 27 participants, 19 identified as Muslim, five as Hindu, two as Buddhist, and one as Christian.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interview sessions, which enabled the researcher to obtain in-depth information while allowing participants the freedom to share their experiences openly. Semi-structured interviews are widely used in phenomenological research (Langdridge, 2007) because they can elicit information, perspectives, and meanings embedded in lived experiences that cannot be replicated (Tisdell & Merriam, 2009).

Before conducting the interviews, the protocol was carefully designed to align with the study objectives. The semi-structured format included several guiding questions to ensure key issues were addressed, while also allowing participants to elaborate on their feelings, thoughts, and perceptions. This approach aligns with phenomenological research, which prioritizes in-depth engagement with individuals' lived experiences and perspectives without imposing restrictive boundaries. During the interview sessions, the researcher also took precautionary steps to practice bracketing to ensure the experiences were captured as authentically as possible. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in a secure, controlled correctional environment, using the Malay language.

Table 1

Summary of Participants' Demographic Information

Prison Institution	Ethnicity		
	Malay	Indian	Chinese
Kajang Prison, Selangor	4	2	-
Sungai Buloh Prison, Selangor	4	-	-
Kajang Women's Prison, Selangor	6	2	1
Bentong Prison, Pahang	1	-	-
Seberang Perai Prison, Penang	1	-	1
Simpang Renggam Prison, Johor	3	1	-
Kluang Prison, Johor	-	-	1

Data Analysis

The researcher transcribed audio recordings from the interview sessions verbatim immediately after each session. The transcripts were read repeatedly to allow the researcher to achieve in-depth familiarity with the participants' lived experiences and to gain a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following several systematic stages, with the assistance of ATLAS.ti 25 software for data organization and coding management.

In the first stage, significant statements and units of meaning related to religious beliefs and suicide attempt experiences were identified from the transcripts. In the second stage, the researchers generated initial inductive codes directly from participants' narratives, without imposing predetermined categories or theoretical assumptions. The authors then grouped similar codes into broader categories based on recurring patterns and shared meanings across participants' experiences. Subsequently, categories with conceptual similarities were organized into preliminary themes. These were continuously reviewed, refined, and compared against the original transcripts to ensure they accurately reflected lived experiences and preserved the contextual meanings conveyed during the interviews. The final themes were retained only after achieving coherence, consistency, and conceptual clarity across the dataset.

The researcher focused on identifying the key themes that surfaced from participants' narratives regarding religious beliefs and practices as protective factors against suicide attempt behavior. Throughout the analytical process, the researcher maintained bracketing by refraining from imposing personal knowledge, interpretations, theoretical assumptions, or experiences.

As a result of the thematic analysis, four meaningful themes were identified: 1) belief in God, 2) religious ritual practices, 3) positive support in the surrounding environment, and 4) meaning in life from a religious perspective. Each theme includes several subthemes, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Summary of Themes and Subthemes

Main theme	Subthemes
Belief in God	i. belief in divine destiny ii. religious prohibitions
Religious ritual practices	i. religious programs within the correctional facility ii. the importance of religious activities iii. integrating religious principles into daily life
Positive support in the surrounding environment	i. support from other incarcerated individuals ii. support from family iii. support from prison officers iv. influence of individuals of other faiths
Meaning in life from a religious perspective	i. religious practices as a source of calm ii. remembering God as a source of strength

The findings section further elaborates on the themes and subthemes. The study also illuminates the meanings of religious beliefs and commitments from the perspectives of the participants, highlighting how these serve as protective factors against suicide attempts, and contributing to the body of relevant literature for future researchers.

Ethics Considerations

Because the study involved human participants drawn from the prison population, the researcher paid careful attention to ethical considerations. The researcher considered participants' emotional stability when selecting suitable individuals and during the interview process. The researcher remained fully aware of participants' rights and ensured they were respected throughout the interviews. Informed consent and participant confidentiality were ensured through verbal and written consent provided via the informed consent form.

The form clearly explained details such as audio recording of interview sessions, the use of interview data for research analysis, and potential publication. They were also informed of their right to decline to answer any questions or to withdraw from the study at any point. The use of pseudonyms to protect participants' identities was also communicated before the interviews.

During the interview sessions, participants were free to discuss their experiences openly and express their emotions and concerns without hesitation, free from judgment by the researcher. They were also allowed to pause and compose themselves when sharing emotionally distressing experiences. At the end of each interview, the participants were allowed to share any additional information or clarifications they wished to convey. The researcher observed that none of the participants exhibited signs of emotional instability after the interviews.

Each interview session was audio-recorded with participants' consent and special permission from the Malaysian Prison Department, granted through approval letter PRIDE.BDK.Rd.500.8/9/1 Jld.74 (45). These recordings were essential to ensure rigorous analysis without omitting important details shared by participants. The Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia granted ethical clearance for this study, as indicated in approval letter JEP-2024-449, and the Malaysian Prison Department also granted permission to conduct the study through approval letter PRIDE.BDK.Rd.500.8/9/1 Jld.73 (21).

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Several strategies enhanced the study's trustworthiness and rigor. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, repeated readings of verbatim transcripts, and continuous comparison of participants' narratives to ensure consistency and depth of interpretation (Nasheeda et al., 2019). The researcher also kept reflexive notes and analytic memos throughout the study to monitor potential biases and preserve participants' intended meanings during the analysis.

To enhance dependability and confirmability, the researcher systematically maintained an audit trail documenting coding decisions, theme development, and methodological reflections throughout the research process (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993). The researcher also held periodic peer discussions with qualitative research experts to review emerging interpretations and thematic structures, reducing the likelihood of subjective bias during data interpretation. In addition, the team continuously compared themes against the original transcripts to ensure the findings accurately reflected participants' lived experiences without altering the contextual meanings conveyed during the interviews. These procedures maintained methodological rigor and consistency within the descriptive phenomenological approach.

Results

Based on the thematic analysis conducted, four themes emerged: 1) belief in God, 2) religious ritual practices, 3) positive support in the surrounding environment, and 4) meaning in life from a religious perspective.

Belief in God

The first theme was belief in God, which comprised two subthemes: 1) belief in divine destiny, and 2) religious prohibitions. The first subtheme reflects participants' sense that what they are currently experiencing is part of God's plan. Several participants expressed acceptance of the destiny determined for them by God, despite having committed offences, violated national laws, and consequently being required to serve sentences in a correctional facility. Their sense of God's presence, grounded in their respective religious traditions, remained intact because they understood their circumstances as part of a divinely ordained destiny. For example, Khairul shared his acceptance of the court's final decision, which reduced his initial mandatory death sentence to 35 years of imprisonment. Although this is a lengthy sentence, he embraced it with an open heart. The revised sentence provided him with a sense of motivation and renewed strength, as he believed that both the initial judgment and its subsequent reduction were part of God's predetermined plan:

> "I have to accept it, I have to be open-hearted. What I did was wrong. And this is my destiny. To face another 35 years is very heavy, it's really heavy for me to accept this reality [the sentence], but I have to be open-hearted because I think others have endured heavier burdens and harsher punishments than this… This is my life's journey, my destiny. This is the punishment I must accept, the price I have to pay [for the wrongdoing that led to my child's death]."

The second subtheme was religious prohibitions. It concerns the idea of suicide as a religious transgression. Participants across various faith traditions, such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity, articulated the view that attempting suicide was considered sinful and forbidden by God. Feelings of guilt emerged when suicidal thoughts or initial impulses arose, but their belief in God and awareness of religious prohibitions helped prevent them from acting on these thoughts. As Jalil explained:

> "I didn't do it [attempt suicide]. It really isn't allowed, right? In Islam you can't commit suicide, it's a sin… that's what I kept thinking about."

Tama, a participant from an Indian background and a practicing Hindu, echoed this view:

> "It's wrong, wrong. God does not accept [death by suicide]."

These accounts demonstrate that religious prohibitions play a protective role, discouraging individuals from acting on suicidal impulses, even when they were experiencing emotional distress during their time in prison.

Religious Ritual Practices

The second theme that emerged was religious ritual practices. It comprised three subthemes: 1) religious programs within the correctional facility, 2) the importance of religious activities, and 3) integrating religious principles into daily life. Participants' involvement in prison religious programs had a positive impact on them. Prisoners were required to participate in programs organized by the facility's religious unit, such as Islamic lectures for Muslim participants, classes for new converts, and Tahfiz programs;

> "The religious unit really emphasizes these things [religious programs], even optional prayers are considered compulsory within the study circles. From Monday to Friday, everyone has to join; unless they are sick, everyone must attend. They divide us into groups like Iqra' 1, Iqra' 2, up to the al-Qur'an." (Faisal)

However, individuals from other religious backgrounds, such as Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians, also had access to religious classes relevant to their own traditions, conducted by religious instructors. For example, Nathan explained that these programs helped him learn and deepen his understanding of his faith. He also noted that they contributed positively to improving his life through religion:

> "I attend the Hindu prayer program every Friday. Praying helps me improve my religious practice, you know, and my life."

They also described these religious programs as a form of therapy. Participants expressed the opinion that such religious activities within the institution provided spiritual support, helped calm their minds, introduced beneficial structure into their daily routines, and prevented them from dwelling on harmful thoughts.

The next subtheme was the importance of religious activities, which meaningfully impacted the participants. Such activities encouraged prisoners to fulfil the obligations of their respective faiths. Selvi, for example, explained that reading the *Bhagavad Gita*, which had been provided to her, strengthened her confidence and deepened her understanding of Hinduism. The scripture taught her both the commandments and prohibitions within her faith:

> "That book [the Bhagavad Gita], it's written by God on how we should change, how not to repeat mistakes. When we die, whether we go to heaven or hell, how many levels, what God says about punishment, things like that. I also learned some prayer chants here [in the prison]."

Similarly, Yuli emphasized that religious activities functioned as a mechanism that prevented her from acting on suicidal impulses. She consistently performed religious obligations and prayed until she received a lighter sentence than the initial sentence. She experienced severe emotional distress and suicidal thoughts when the original sentence was passed for the act that caused her child's death. The hardship, however, brought her closer to religious practices, which she performed alone in her cell. Daily prayer and adherence to Christian teachings became essential sources of strength and reaffirmation of God's presence in her life. It also explains the importance of religion in her life:

> "So I prayed in my cell; I prayed in the Christian way. Actually, I asked God through Christianity. I know God is one, but the way I pray is Christian, right up until I came down from death row."

The narratives of Selvi and Yuli illustrate how religious activities within the correctional facility function as protective factors, supporting suicide prevention through structured spiritual programs.

The third subtheme was integration of religious principles into daily life. This subtheme emerged from the verbatim analysis and reflected how living according to religious teachings motivated individuals not to engage in risky behaviors, including suicide attempts:

> "If I hear those whispers, I strengthen myself by reciting prayers [*selawat*]. *Alhamdulillah,* the things those whispers tell me to do. I don't do them. I feel calm, truly calm, after reciting prayers, listening to stories of the Prophet, and reciting prayers. It keeps my mind away from suicide." (Zul)

Zul explained that reciting prayers to the Prophet, performing ritual worship, and remembering the Prophet not only helped him manage mental health difficulties, but also restored his confidence and motivation to avoid repeating previous suicide attempts.

Idayu shared similar experiences. Reading the al-Qur'an, seeking forgiveness through *istighfar*, and reciting prayers upon the Prophet helped her manage her mental health symptoms, thus preventing her from engaging in suicidal behavior. These practices strengthened her inner resilience:

> "When I have a seizure, I quickly recite. Sometimes I have to sit on the floor until it passes. When my eyes start rolling upwards, I quickly read the al-Qur'an, say *istighfar*, and recite prayers. It's better here [in the prison], I don't get suicidal thoughts as often."

Idayu's statement reinforces Zul's explanation that reciting *istighfar*, reciting prayers to the Prophet, and reading the al-Qur'an provided emotional stability and inner peace during incarceration. These practices delayed or prevented suicidal thoughts and supported their daily coping processes within the prison.

Positive Support in the Surrounding Environment

The third theme was positive support in the surrounding environment, comprising four subthemes: 1) support from other incarcerated individuals, 2) support from family, 3) support from prison officers, and 4) influence from individuals of other faiths.

The first subtheme highlights the positive assistance participants received from peers within the prison institution. The presence of other prisoners from diverse backgrounds created opportunities for mutual support, particularly strengthening religious beliefs and practices. Teaching and sharing religious knowledge among peers helped reinforce their spiritual foundations. For example, Zul explained that he learned how to perform prayers from another prisoner. He also learned to read the al-Qur'an with peers in his cell:

> "I just started learning to pray because my friends [people in prison] were there and could teach me about religion. It felt like being in a hostel. We sat and learned to recite together. That's it, I followed them, learned from them." (Zul)

This peer support gave Zul meaningful social connections and a support system that helped him resist thoughts or actions that could endanger his life.

Participants also emphasized the second subtheme: support from family. During incarceration, this played an important role in personal recovery and behavioral change, including the strengthening of religious commitments. Support received through visits or telephone calls reassured participants and helped deter harmful behaviors such as self-injury or suicide attempts. It was reflected in the accounts of Atikah and Aina:

> "Sometimes I have religious books. My family also sends me religious books. So through those books, I read again, oh, this is how life should be lived…[Islamic teachings] guide us to reshape our mindset, reminding us that we have faith and a God." (Atikah)

> "Yes, that's what strengthened me. Luckily, my husband comes every month. My father always uses the prison phone service and calls me every week. He keeps telling me to remember God, remember God. Sometimes I worry too because my mental state is unstable." (Aina)

These statements from Atikah and Aina show how family support helped prevent participants from dwelling on or acting upon harmful thoughts during their imprisonment.

The third subtheme, support from prison officers, refers to spiritual or motivational guidance provided by prison officers, which is also seen as something that helps prisoners avoid engaging in risky behavior such as suicide attempts. Because prison officers are present for long shifts, often seven to eight hours, participants described them as accessible sources of advice. For example, Jalil stated that an officer encouraged him to perform his prayers, which brought him a sense of calm during incarceration:

> "The officer just told me to pray. So, I followed him and prayed. It gave me some peace."

Such interactions highlight the meaningful role that prison officers can play in preventing high-risk behaviors, including suicide attempts, by offering ongoing reminders to practice faith-based coping strategies.

The fourth subtheme was the influence of individuals of other faiths. Malaysia's multicultural and multireligious context was reflected within the correctional population. Participants described how exposure to diverse beliefs provided additional spiritual encouragement, even when the advice came from someone of a different religion. Saddam, for instance, explained that another prisoner of a different faith advised him against suicide:

> "I'm grateful. I pray a lot even though he is not from my religion. He [my peer] is from another religion, but he still advised me to do good. So I was stunned; even though he's not Muslim, he gave me such advice. I felt embarrassed that he, from another religion, advised me. I'm really grateful to him."

Selvi also described receiving support from peers of other religions. She sometimes requested water that had been prayed over from Muslim peers during the recitation of Surah Yasin, using it to wash her face, which helped her feel calmer:

> "Even in the room, when others prayed, I asked for Yasin water. I washed my face and drank it … it made me feel a bit calmer."

The diversity of religious beliefs and practices within the setting was a distinctive strength, particularly in supporting individuals experiencing significant life stress. This diversity reflects a form of harmony in which people from various ethnic and religious backgrounds can practice their own beliefs while respecting the rights, faiths, and ways of life of others. The prisoners' statements further show that interfaith interactions can offer meaningful spiritual support, even as each individual remains grounded in their own religious tradition.

Meaning in Life from a Religious Perspective

The final theme related to the protective role of religious belief and practice in preventing suicide attempts among prisoners is the meaning in life from a religious perspective. Two subthemes emerged: 1) religious practices as a source of calm, and 2) remembering God as a source of strength.

The first reflects how participants found meaning in life through their respective religious perspectives. The diversity of religious traditions also emerged as a protective factor shaping how participants interpreted meaning in life. Usya, a prisoner of Indian ethnicity and a practicing Hindu, described the sentence she was facing as a form of divine punishment, which motivated her to change her behavior while imprisoned. This shift encouraged her to avoid engaging in self-harm or other risky actions. She further explained that everything that happened to her stemmed from her own past mistakes, and she viewed her imprisonment as a consequence delivered by God;

> "God's punishment … I must become a good person, don't think about unnecessary things … I must change myself."

Usya's statement illustrates that religious belief not only offered a sense of peace, but also contributed to emotional stability and became a source of motivation to continue living within the prison environment.

The final subtheme under the broader theme of finding meaning in life through a religious perspective is the idea that remembering God provides strength to those imprisoned. Participants describe believing in God and trusting that God can help in difficult or unwanted situations as a meaningful element of their religious worldview. By remembering God, a person gains inner strength, and at the same time, that strength can help a prisoner avoid engaging in high-risk behaviors such as attempting self-harm or suicide. For example, Aina explained that Allah was her source of strength, and she consistently feels assured of Allah's love:

> "Yes, that is the only thing that strengthens me, remembering that Allah loves me, Allah loves me, that's all."

The participants' statements show that this sense of divine support not only motivated them

emotionally but also encouraged them to continue doing good throughout their time in prison. Their religious beliefs functioned as an ongoing internal reminder to keep living and to stay engaged in positive change while serving their sentences. The narratives also show that religious meaning provides comfort and a moral compass that shapes daily choices and reduces the likelihood of self-destructive behavior.

Discussion

The study findings show that spiritual and religious belief functions as a complex psychological resource that helps prisoners manage the emotional distress that can lead to suicidal thoughts. Religious belief is not merely theoretical; rather, it becomes a lived experience that guides participants' reasoning, strengthens emotional resilience, and reshapes how they understand suffering.

Understanding human creation and destiny in Islamic terms, as described by Alfani et al. (2024), provides a foundation for individuals to accept life experiences as part of divine provision. The four identified themes demonstrate that belief in God, religious ritual practices, positive support in the surrounding environment, and meaning in life from a religious perspective work together as layered protective systems. The findings suggest that religious belief functions not only as a spiritual commitment, but also as a psychological coping mechanism that assists prisoners in regulating emotional distress, reconstructing hopeless cognitive patterns, and preserving a sense of meaning during periods of suicidal crisis.

Religious prohibitions against suicide, which is considered a major sin in many traditions, including Islam and Judaism (Teo et al., 2021), also establish moral boundaries that discourage such high-risk behaviors. Practices such as reading the al-Qur'an, seeking forgiveness, and engaging in recital of God have been shown to strengthen faith and help people in prison cope with life stressors (Murtadho et al., 2022). In the prison context, spiritually based interventions such as dhikr, prayer, and *munajat* have also been found to support participants' mental stability (Abdullah & Zaki, 2021; Farida et al., 2025). These findings align with Poorolajal et al. (2021), whose meta-analysis indicates that structured spiritual programs can serve as protective mechanisms.

Moreover, deep engagement in religious practices can reshape individuals' cognitive patterns, helping them manage emotional pressure more effectively (Herry et al., 2025). The calming psychological effects of reciting *selawat*, as reported by Aufa et al. (2020), align with the study participants' experiences. Spiritual approaches involving religious practices and meditation have also been linked to reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety (Zain et al., 2024).

Religious commitment among prisoners appears to be strengthened not only through personal belief systems, but also through positive social interactions within the prison environment (Gojković, 2025). Supportive relationships with peers, family members, and prison officers were found to reinforce participants' spiritual resilience and assist them in managing the emotional distress that could potentially trigger suicidal behavior. Participants described how reminders from peers, shared religious learning, communal reflections, and emotional encouragement provided psychological strength and a sense of connectedness during imprisonment. These findings are consistent with Suradi and Hussin (2023), who emphasized the importance of positive social relationships in facilitating behavioral change and emotional support among incarcerated populations. Similarly, family support through continuous communication, emotional reassurance, and encouragement appeared to strengthen participants' motivation for personal recovery and spiritual commitment. The

involvement of prison officers who provided moral and spiritual guidance also contributed positively to participants' rehabilitation processes, supporting Amirrul and Rastam (2024), who highlighted the importance of institutional support in prisoner rehabilitation.

This findings can be understood through several complementary theoretical perspectives. From that of Pargament et al. (2013), religious belief and spiritual practices function as important coping resources that help individuals interpret suffering, regulate emotional distress, and construct meaning during difficult life experiences. In this study, the participants described how prayer, religious rituals, and remembrance of God provided emotional calmness, hope, and psychological endurance during periods of suicidal crisis. Similarly, Durkheim's sociological perspective suggests that religion strengthens moral regulation and social integration, both of which may reduce vulnerability to self-destructive behavior (Durkheim, 2005).

Spiritually supportive relationships within the prison environment appear to reinforce participants' sense of belonging and emotional connectedness during imprisonment. These findings also resonate with the interpersonal theory of suicide, which proposes that religious engagement and spiritually supportive relationships may reduce feelings of social disconnection and perceived burdensomeness by strengthening interpersonal belonging and emotional support within correctional environments (Bochey, 2026). The findings are also consistent with the integrated motivational-volitional model, suggesting that religious meaning systems and spiritual coping may function as protective moderators that interrupt the progression from suicidal ideation toward action (Unlu, 2025). Collectively, these perspectives indicate that spirituality operates not only as a religious commitment, but also as a multidimensional psychological, social, and existential protective mechanism among prisoners experiencing suicidal distress.

Beyond these protective functions, one of the most unique findings emerging from our study was the presence of cross-religious influence within the prison environment. For example, the influence described by Selvi, a Hindu participant who used "Yasin water" to calm herself, raises questions about how individuals cross the boundaries of their own religious teachings in practical ways. Such actions may reflect belief across different religious understandings; borrowing practices based on current situations; or efforts to find calm from any source perceived as helpful when facing stress (Subardjo et al., 2024). The findings also show that the strengthening of religious expression among those in prison may be influenced by the highly structured prison environment, including institutional expectations, group norms, and the motivation to present oneself as moral and well-behaved (Jalil, 2017). This phenomenon can also be understood within the context of Malaysia's cultural diversity, where interfaith cooperation serves as a foundation for strengthening spiritual values (Zain et al., 2024). It also shows the harmony that exists in an environment made up of various ethnicities, where each religious follower can practice their own faith while not interfering with the rights, beliefs, or ways of life of others. Ali et al. (2021) explain that this harmony reflects the reality that people of various religions can practice their teachings without disturbing others' beliefs.

Participants also described how their religious beliefs and spiritual strength provided calmness and emotional stability that helped them recover from stressful experiences. It aligns with the findings of Sobri et al. (2022), who argue that strong religious grounding can contribute to emotional stability and renewed motivation. Furthermore, understanding Islamic values such as compassion, justice, and social responsibility provides guidance that strengthens participants'

moral behavior and social relationships (Siregar et al., 2025).

Overall, the study findings show that religious belief and spiritual practices function as multidimensional psychological, existential, and social protective mechanisms within correctional settings. Rather than functioning solely as expressions of religious devotion, spirituality and religious engagement appear to serve as important psychological and emotional coping mechanisms among prisoners experiencing suicidal crises (Kropíková, 2026). The findings suggest that spirituality assists individuals in regulating emotional distress; reconstructing meaning in life; maintaining hope; and strengthening interpersonal connectedness during periods of severe psychological vulnerability. In this regard, emotional dysregulation has been identified as a significant psychological factor underlying self-harming behavior and suicidal vulnerability among individuals experiencing intense emotional distress (Rachma & Hendrawan, 2025). The findings therefore indicate that spiritual commitment may help mitigate emotional instability by providing existential meaning, emotional comfort, and a renewed sense of purpose.

The findings of the present study suggest that religious faith and belief may provide incarcerated individuals with psychological and spiritual resources to endure distressing experiences and maintain hope during periods of suicidal crisis. This interpretation aligns with García Martínez and Gómez-Quintero (2025), who found that religious engagement within prison can serve as an adaptive coping mechanism for the highly stressful conditions of confinement and alleviate some of the disruptive effects of imprisonment. More recently, García Martínez and Eito Mateo (2026) showed that religious experiences among prisoners serving long sentences may contribute to the development of personal religious capital, which provides structure for identity reconstruction and self-dignification while strengthening resilience. Taken together, these studies provide an important contextual basis for understanding how religious resources may acquire particular significance within restrictive institutional environments. In the context of the present study, such adaptive and resilience related functions may help explain how faith and religious belief became meaningful protective resources for prisoners who had experienced suicidal crises.

However, evidence concerning the protective role of religiosity within correctional populations is not entirely consistent. In a cross-sectional study involving 228 incarcerated individuals in Brazil, Ranuzi et al. (2020) reported high levels of religiosity among participants. Still, they found no statistically significant association between religiosity and suicidal thinking. Depression, in contrast, emerged as a significant correlate of suicidal thinking. These findings indicate that the relationship between religiosity and suicidality within prison populations may be more complex than a direct protective association. The apparent difference from the present findings may also reflect the distinct dimensions being examined.

The findings also reveal that spiritual engagement within prison institutions is shaped by broader institutional structures, cultural interactions, interpersonal relationships, and social expectations, highlighting the complex and dynamic nature of religious coping among incarcerated populations. This interpretation is consistent with Mourries (2025), who highlighted the perceived role of Christian spiritual care in supporting identity formation, moral development, and holistic rehabilitation among incarcerated youth. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on suicidal behavior by clarifying how spiritual strength interacts with emotional, social, and cultural factors to shape resilience among prisoners. The interfaith support

element identified in the study also contributes to current academic discussions on emotional recovery and resilience within multicultural correctional settings. The findings suggest that spiritual and religious commitment may function not only as personal coping resources, but also as socially embedded protective mechanisms that support emotional regulation and meaning reconstruction during suicidal crises.

The findings further indicate the importance of integrating spiritually informed approaches into prison rehabilitation and suicide prevention programs. Spiritual and religious interventions implemented within correctional institutions may help strengthen emotional resilience, reinforce moral values, and foster renewed meaning in life among prisoners experiencing psychological distress. In addition, positive social support from family members, peers, prison officers, and religious personnel appears to play an important role in strengthening emotional stability and rehabilitation processes within prison environments.

From a policy perspective, prison institutions should consider expanding access to inclusive faith-based services that are sensitive to Malaysia's religious and cultural diversity. Collaboration among prison authorities, religious officers, counsellors, community leaders, and spiritual practitioners may help ensure that emotional and spiritual support is delivered systematically and holistically. Policies that encourage consistent family communication and spiritually supportive rehabilitation environments may also contribute positively to suicide prevention efforts within correctional institutions (Igwe et al., 2025). These findings highlight the need for culturally sensitive rehabilitation frameworks that integrate psychological, spiritual, and social dimensions into suicide prevention strategies for prison populations.

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the study's findings. First, the sample involved only 27 prisoners from seven prison institutions, which may limit the transferability of the findings to broader prison populations within Malaysia. Second, the highly structured and controlled prison environment may have influenced how participants expressed their emotional experiences, religious beliefs, and spiritual identities during the interviews. The possibility of social desirability bias should also be considered, particularly when discussing sensitive issues related to spirituality, morality and suicidal behavior. In addition, Malaysia's multicultural and multireligious context may uniquely shape participants' spiritual experiences, limiting direct comparisons with correctional settings in other countries.

Future research is recommended to explore further the relationship between spirituality, religious coping, and suicidal behavior among prison populations using broader methodological approaches. Mixed methods and longitudinal studies may provide a deeper understanding regarding the long-term psychological effects of spiritual interventions and religious rehabilitation programs within correctional settings. Comparative studies across gender, offense categories, religious affiliations, and cultural backgrounds may also contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how spirituality interacts with emotional resilience and suicide prevention among prisoners.

Conclusion

Overall, the study demonstrates that religious belief and spiritual commitment function as important psychological, social, and existential protective mechanisms among prisoners who have experienced suicidal crises. The findings reveal that spirituality not only helps regulate emotional distress and strengthen resilience, but also contributes to reconstructing meaning, hope, and interpersonal connectedness during imprisonment. Together, the findings highlight the

significant role of spiritually informed support systems in strengthening suicide prevention efforts and emotional rehabilitation within correctional institutions.[]

Author Contribution Statement

Lokmanul Hakim Hamid: Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project Administration; Resources; Validation; Visualization; Writing Original Draft; Writing, Review & Editing. **Nasrudin Subhi:** Data Curation; Funding Acquisition; Investigation; Supervision and References. **Mohammad Rahim Kamaluddin**: Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Resources; Writing, Review & Editing; Supervision and References. **Lim L. Gin:** Methodology; Writing, Review & Editing. **Syasyila Kalaivanan:** Methodology; Validation; Writing, Review & Editing.

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