

Prisoners allowed to observe holy days while serving sentences

Scottish prisons will allow inmates to observe more than 65 religious holy days this year for 14 faiths including Zoroastrian, Pagan and Rastafarian, and three dates from the Christian calendar.

The Scottish Government issued a schedule noting “recognised days of religious observance” to the Scottish Prison Service (SPS).

The Scottish Prison Rules (Religious Observance) Direction 2025 shows three recognised holy days for Christian inmates – Good Friday, Easter Day and Christmas Day – while Rastafarians and Zoroastrians each have four and Pagans have eight.

Baha’i – a religion founded in the 19th century in Iran, which counts over 500 followers throughout Scotland – has the most with nine, while Jehovah’s Witnesses have just one, the Memorial of Christ’s Death on 12 April.

Scottish Ministers drew up the list, which was then rubber stamped by SPS chief executive. Teresa Medhurst, “in exercise of the powers conferred by section 39 of the Prisons (Scotland) Act 1989”.

The 14 religions include Baha’i (9 days), Buddhist (3), Christian (3), Hindu (6), Jain (5), Jehovah’s Witness (1),

Jewish (6, including some such as Passover that span multiple days), Muslim (4), Orthodox Christian (4), Pagan (8), Quaker (2, including Quaker Week, which spans eight days), Rastafarian (4), Sikh (6) and Zoroastrian (4).

In a move that has prompted comment from the Roman Catholic Church, some Christian holy days did not make the list, including Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, the Epiphany, Palm Sunday, All Saints Day, Advent, Lent and Pentecost.

A spokesman for the Catholic Church in Scotland said: "The Catholic Church welcomes the acknowledgment of religious observance for the people in its care by the Scottish Prison Service.

"We are disappointed that religious observance for Catholics seems to have been overlooked in terms of pastoral care and look forward to this omission being corrected."

Scottish Census

According to the 2022 Scottish Census, the majority of people in Scotland identified as having no religion (51.1%), with those identifying as Christian making up nearly one in four (38.8%) translating to around 2.1million people.

The largest Christian denominations were the Church of Scotland at 20.4% of the population and Roman Catholics at 13.3% with other Christians at 5.1%.

Data shows the Church of Scotland had 1,107,796 followers with 723,322 Catholics.

Census data shows there were 119,872 Muslims, 29,929 Hindus and 278 Jains, along with 9440 Jehovah's Witnesses, 15,501 Buddhists, 10,988 Sikhs and 5,847 members of the Jewish faith.

Baha'i and Zoroastrian faiths have 511 and 114 followers respectively in Scotland, with 136 Rastafarians and 18,087

Pagans.

Among the eight Pagan holy days recognised are Beltane, Spring Equinox, Summer Solstice, Autumn and Winter Equinox or Yule.

While Baha'i has been described as the "world's youngest major religion" Zoroastrianism, a monotheistic religion also originating in Iran and said to be more than 3,000 years old, is one of the oldest still practiced today.

An ancient religion from India, Jains believe in reincarnation and that all living things including plants and animals have souls of equal value, while Rastafarianism originated in Jamaica in the 1930s and is based on the ideas of Marcus Garvey, a political activist who wanted to improve the status of black people.

Despite the busy schedule of holy days the SPS says information regarding religious affiliation among its approximately 8,000-strong population is "not robust enough to publish".

In 2013, Scottish Government data showed 29% of offenders said they belonged to the Church of Scotland while 23% were Roman Catholic, and 40% said they did not have a religion.

Prisons provide religious observance days to respect the rights of prisoners to practice their faith which, in turn, is said to contribute to their well-being and rehabilitation.

Studies suggest that religious involvement can positively impact prisoner behavior, helping with self-discipline, reducing aggression and promoting prosocial attitudes.

Religious practices can offer comfort, support, and a sense of meaning, which can be beneficial for mental health, particularly in a stressful prison environment.

Neither the Scottish Government nor the SPS would clarify how the religious schedule was compiled, despite the government

having issued a Direction.

They are essentially official instructions given by Scottish Ministers and used to clarify policy interpretation or mandate specific actions by public bodies.

A Scottish government spokesperson said: “This is an operational matter for the Scottish Prison Service. As part of their duty of care, the Scottish Prison Service has policies in place that support prisoners to commemorate a range of days associated with their chosen faith.”

A spokesperson for the SPS said: “We recognise the importance of religion to many in our care and support them to commemorate a range of days associated with their faith including, but not limited to, those on this non-exhaustive list.”



Photo by Rodolfo Clix on [Pexels.com](https://www.pexels.com)