

An honest conversation about Faith with Nilly Dahlia

This week, Clemmie speaks to Nilly Dahlia about motherhood, her faith and how the two interact with one another. Growing up in a predominantly non-Muslim area, Nilly explains how her faith found her and shares her experience of being a modern Muslim and raising her young family with culture and faith at the heart of their daily lives.

Clemmie

Hi and welcome to Honestly Podcast! I'm Clemmie Telford and I'm going to be doing one of my favorite things. No, not leaving every party before 10p.m. Having a proper frank open chat about tricky, sticky and otherwise unspoken about subjects. Today we're talking to someone who is using her social channels to show people how to implement Islam into western family lifestyles. A woman with an extraordinary collection of headscarves as well as three kids under four, it's Nilly Dahlia! Hello, how are you?

Nilly

Hi, how are you?

Clemmie

And actually it's not just you here, is it?

Nilly

No, it's not, I've got little baby Isla with me!

Clemmie

Little baby Isla who is 8 weeks old! This week I've given up breastfeeding and I'm trying to move on to the next chapter of my life, and seeing a little tiny head is not doing anything for that. I'm gonna go home and talk to my husband about it, and he's gonna be furious. No more babies for us. I don't think, but never say never!

Nilly

Never, say never!

Clemmie

That's what we've agreed. The way to stop me crying recently for him to say, "We'll say maybe, and then..."

Nilly

You never know what could happen.

Clemmie

No, you never know! Anyway, that's not what we're here to talk about. So we're gonna start with a quick fire round, and as the title of this podcast suggests, it's all about being honest. So wet the whistle, I'm gonna ask you some quick fire questions... A great meal or great sex?

Nilly

Great meal.

Clemmie

Fame or fortune?

Nilly

Uh, neither.

Clemmie

Leave or remain?

Nilly

Oh, I want to remain

Clemmie

Reincarnation: probable or not a chance?

Nilly

Well in my faith you'd say not a chance.

Clemmie

Social media: good or bad?

Nilly

Bad.

Clemmie

In a different tact: have you ever committed a crime?

Nilly

No... I'm a good girl.

Clemmie

I admitted to the fact that in my misspent youth I may have eaten one of those cookies that you help yourself to at Tesco's on the way around and not paid for it.

Nilly

Oh, I'm the worst honestly. You know when I had my first son, I walked out with a milk and then had to drive all the way back to return it.

Clemmie

I've used to do that in coffee shops all the time. Like when you're with mums with new babies chat, chat, chat, chat. Then you just get up and walk out. I would go back and pay of course! Do you believe in a God?

Nilly

Yes, I do.

Clemmie

This comes from my own experience as well: have you ever peed in that swimming pool?

Nilly

No, I don't like swimming.

Clemmie

Oh there you go, that's an easy one. When did you last cry?

Nilly

Uh, the other day I think.

Clemmie

That's quite good that you had to think about it, given that you've got a small baby. Quite a crier when I'm hormonal. Worst habit?

Nilly

Worst habit is probably leaving stuff up the stairs and just walking past it.

Clemmie

The stair pile!

Nilly

Yeah.

Clemmie

You're the one who ignores it!

Nilly

I pile it up and I just leave it - I'm the worst!

Clemmie

It just goes up more and more steps, doesn't it? Um, these are especially for you as a fellow mum of three. When did you last have a full night's sleep?

Nilly

Last night.

Clemmie

What?!

Nilly

I'm telling you this, baby, I deserve sleep OK? The other two did not sleep.

Clemmie

So you had it coming. Do sometimes eat your kids leftovers?

Nilly

Of course!

Clemmie

Of all the bodily fluids your kids leave on you, which is your least favorite?

Nilly

Poop.

Clemmie

Is it? I'll take poo over vomit.

Nilly

Really? Oh yeah I suppose the smell... I feel like vomit comes out the mouth, so it's kind of better than poo.

Clemmie

So there we go, none of those were very scary were they? So now we're going on to the section that I'm calling 'The Big Topic' and your big topic is Faith. When I invited you in I asked myself how I describe my own faith. I was brought up Catholic. Church was a very significant part of my upbringing, I regularly attended a tiny village church and it felt like a community, and as such, I got married there. I love the deep sense of connection walking down the aisle where my auntie had, and the fact that my grandparents were buried outside. But as time has gone by, I've been less sure about how I feel about God, and it's something that I wrangle. But anyway, this isn't about me. This is about you and your faith. What does your faith mean to you?

Nilly

Um, I think for me that my faith is perfect. Obviously with media it's all portrayed differently. I feel like the faith is perfect, but the people aren't perfect. So I feel like is a perfect faith.

Clemmie

You're Muslim aren't you?

Nilly

Yes, I am.

Clemmie

Where did you grow up and was it a largely Muslim area?

Nilly

I actually grew up in a predominantly white village, So I was the only hijabi in the village.

Clemmie

Gosh, were you?

Nilly

Yeah.

Clemmie

So for me, and I grew up in a tiny, very white village as well, the school curriculum was very much geared towards the Christian calendar. Was that same for you? And how did you navigate that?

Nilly

Yeah, I went to Church of England school.

Clemmie

Did you?

Nilly

Yeah I went to all the services that we had to go to.

Clemmie

Did you go knowing that wasn't your faith or not or were you oblivious?

Nilly

I was really oblivious to it until, like a year six. At that age, you find your faith more boring. I did use the faith card: 'I can't go it's against my religion'

Clemmie

Like trying the old periods and swimming thing when you're at school? So yeah you did, then opted out of...

Nilly

But to be honest, I didn't actually look into my faith until I was 21.

Clemmie

That's what was going to ask you next. When did you become aware of it?

Nilly

Well, I grew up obviously having my Arabic tutors come to our house because we lived in a village where there wasn't any mosque around us, so we'd have him come over. And because it was done in such a boring way, we dreaded it. And like, as bad as it sounds now, looking back, we just didn't enjoy our faith. But now I feel like because we were experienced that we didn't understand it. For the We do it differently. Now we make it so much more fun. There's so much more resource is that we did not have when we were kids, like alphabet blocks in colour. We did not have that in arabic in this country.

Clemmie

Are you now in a more diverse area?

Nilly

No, I have gone into an even smaller village. No street lights.

Clemmie

So the real deal. No mosque I take it?

Nilly

No, no mosque. There's one in the near village which my husband goes to with my son for Friday prayers. One of my agendas is to make Islam more fun for my kids because I didn't find it fun. That's why I didn't look into it until I was 21. I just feel like you can be taught differently,

Clemmie

Yep, and it might help them engage with it. In terms of picking your children's school, is that part of how you make your choices? Well, you haven't really got that option if you're in a village.

Nilly

Yeah, someone else asked me that as well, "do I send my kids to a Madrasa?" Yeah, my nan did. And I said, "no. I'm going to send them to rest during the school", because that's how I grew up. Madrasa is an Islamic school and even if we had a Madrasa two doors down, I probably wouldn't have enrolled him into that anyway.

Clemmie

For what reason?

Nilly

Um, just because to put him into an environment that I don't know...

Clemmie

Yeah and that wasn't your upbringing..

Nilly

Exactly.

Clemmie

Do you think your children would be able to articulate that they're Muslim?

Nilly

They know Halal and Haram. They will be like, "Mum, can I eat this is it Halal?" and I'll be like "no, it's got pig in it". He'll be like "ahhh, no!".

Clemmie

They love it when they get hold of things like that don't they. Even mine are always asking if things are vegetarian or vegan.

Nilly

Oh, are they vegan?

Clemmie

No their not. It would be really difficult for them to be vegan because they love cheese strings an awful lot. They also love pepperamis. Again, an awful food. So you wrote a brilliant list for Mother of All list about Ramadan. It was so educational and opened my eyes and made me realize how little I knew. For those listening, could you explain to them about Ramadan? In layman's terms?

Nilly

Ramadan is a month of when we fast. So we fast from sunrise to sunset for a month. The Islamic calendar is based on the luna, so the moon. So it goes forward every 10 days. So this year it is gonna April the fifth.

Clemmie

So sometimes it could be right when the day is a really, really long.

Nilly

Yeah, basically, when I was a kid and obviously we saw Mum and Dad do Ramadan and all that. The days were really short. So Mum and Dad let us do it for fun. We would be breaking our fast at like four o'clock. But last year my husband was breaking out at like 9:30 in the evening.

Clemmie

And so he won't have even since....

Nilly

It's really long hours. This time of year it's so long. We did it for 19 hours last year.

Clemmie

So you fast all day and then you break fast. Is that some kind of feasting occasion?

Nilly

Yes, so we feast.

Clemmie

Everyday for a month?

Nilly

Everyday for a month. You break it with date, so it just energizes you again. Because obviously you haven't eaten or drank water for the entire day.

Clemmie

Do you feel horrendous? Or do you get used to it?

Nilly

You do get used. It always the first few days that are quite tough and people actually, to train their body into it, they fast before hand to get used to the long hours.

Clemmie

Do they? I am so grouchy when I don't eat. Does it not cause arguments? Is it part of it that you're allowing each other that kind of space for being...?

Nilly

I think we understand but also you say during Ramadan you shouldn't raise your voice. You shouldn't shout, you shouldn't swear, this is your chance to be really pure. Because in Islam we believe during this month of Ramadan, the devil we call Shaitan, he is locked up. So if you are bad in that month, you can't blame the devil. So that's the month that you are meant to be really

good, pure. They obviously say that 21 days forms a habit. So if you're good for those 30 days, you've formed a habit and hopefully you carry on being good for the rest of the year. I also feel like the vibe during Ramadan is just so nice and peaceful.

Clemmie

Really?

Nilly

Yes. When you go to like office, I don't go to the mosque because I don't have one near me, but when we go food shopping to the Halal stores, the vibe, even there amongst other Muslims, it's just so nice.

Clemmie

I always liked any excuse to talk about food. What kind of food would you eat? A date is nice but I'm sure there's other delicious things...

Nilly

Well, we grew up having let samosas, all the bad fried food, mum would make biryani. Now obviously people are much more aware of what is good for you. People have a lot of watermelons, cucumbers, any food that's got water content in it. You have to remember that you have to pray at night because during Ramadan you have special prays as well which are really lengthy. If you have eaten a lot, then you're going to be retired and lethargic. So you don't want to.

Clemmie

So your not going to get much sleep during that time?

Nilly

No, you don't It's really difficult.

Clemmie

Not much sleep, you're hungry. I'm hungry. I mean, that is a challenge, isn't it?

Nilly

It is really hard. But I've been excused so...

Clemmie

When you're pregnant, which you've been a lot of years. And nursing does that count?

Nilly

Yes. So when you're breastfeeding, you are excused as well but only up to a year think it is. I think, I can't quite remember but you're excused. So some mums feel guilty for not fasting during Ramadan because it only comes once a year and it's such a big occasion in our faith. So some people start the day fasting and when they feel like their supply is dipping they do break it. I think, with my son, because it was the first time that it was Ramadan, I wasn't pregnant and I was just feeding him - I felt so guilty for not fasting. So I thought, I'll give it a go for one day and he was just so different because he wasn't getting enough milk and not because I didn't have enough in me, but because it was just different. He felt my stress and I thought: "I just can't do

this". Because he has rights over my body for two years for breast milk - it's what we believe in our faith.

Clemmie

Really?

Nilly

Yes, so that takes priority.

Clemmie

And when do children start doing it?

Nilly

They can start whenever they want, it's never forced on them. But when kids hit puberty, that's when they should really be doing it.

Clemmie

When they're unconscious of what they're doing.

Nilly

Yeah, yeah.

Clemmie

Then at the end of Ramadan is Ede.

Nilly

So Ede is the end of fasting. That means that you celebrate the end of fasting and you can eat all day - however long! It's a three day celebration so basically I take it as like our version of Christmas. I go all out! I want my kids to be excited for Ede because I was never excited for Ede, I even used to go into school. And now I'm thinking indeed announcing in my kids are not going to school on Ede, we're going on the celebrate.

Clemmie

So you do decorate, wear nice clothes?

Nilly

Yeah, you wear your best clothes. So you're supposed to wear your best new clothes. Or like your nicest clothes. Because it's a celebration time. Obviously we don't do Christmas technically, you shouldn't do birthdays - so Ede is like the big one.

Clemmie

Yeah - that you go all out for. In your list, as well as talking about the fact that you are exempt when you're nursing, what about when you've got your period?

Nilly

Yes. So, basically, in our faith, you're unclean, so to speak when you're on your period. So you excused from fasting, and you're also excused for old age, medication.

Clemmie

What about if you're ill?

Nilly

Yeah if you're ill.

Clemmie

But what about, you mentioned how it could be quite difficult if you've got small children and therefore you don't get to break fast with other people and women can often be left out.

Nilly

Yeah it is hard. I find motherhood difficult and obviously because of the long hours... So for our generation, I feel like mum's are finding it really lonely, especially if you want to maintain a routine for your kids. For school and stuff. So my kids go to bed at seven and most people are still fasting at seven. So no mum's, are going out at that time because everyone's kids are going to bed. So then, when the kids are sleeping and you're making the food, you're on your own. But if you're with your husband, that's fine.

Clemmie

Would there ever be in a situation where a man would stay at home and do that and the women would go to pray?

Nilly

I think that I've heard some families that do that. Bit I think in the last four years my husband's been working evenings, so I've spent every single thing on Ramadan on my own. So even though I wasn't fasting, I always like to...

Clemmie

You need to do an Instagram live or something? Find somebody to break fast with

Nilly

That's a good idea

Clemmie

Ah these poor mum's! We always get the raw deal don't we?

Nilly

I know we do!

Clemmie

I also delved a lot into your social profiles. I saw that you had what you just described as Islam Birth plans? Can you say more about that?

Nilly

Yes! So obviously women are meant to be more modest. Cover your hair and, like from your wrists to your ankles should be covered, including your neck. So technically you should be fully covered. But obviously, when you're in labor, it's really hard to be fully covered.

Clemmie

I got all my clothes off quite quickly, that's how I knew I was going, like in the real bit. I was like: 'I do not want anything on anymore' So were you clothed for your?

Nilly

Well for my first one, I wore like a maxi dress, and I just hoisted it up. And then I tried to cover up with my scarf, and then I just thought: 'you know what I'm not wearing this!'. On my birth plan I wrote that I didn't want any male attendants coming in. Obviously, in Islam, you should want to have as few people as possible looking at your body. So I even had for my firstborn to only have, the midwife and main nurse - I didn't want any medical students, but with my second and third, because there were a few like complications and stuff, I was happy for them to come in. Obviously my trust is a university hospital so there's gonna be loads off students there.

Clemmie

And then that moment, your priorities change.

Nilly

And birth plans go out the window.

Clemmie

Yeah, Exactly. I just always laugh at first time births - you take that hospital bag and you've got all this stuff, you know and you didn't look at any of it.

Nilly

Did you wear socks in hospital?

Clemmie

No

Nilly

Why does everyone say take socks?

Clemmie

It's absolutely is boiling on that labour ward - I would just take flip flops because of the showers and then I had home births the second and third times.

Nilly

See I wanted home births with my last two.

Clemmie

But you weren't able to? That would have been ideal for you I assume.

Nilly

Exactly! So it would have been perfect because I knew he was coming to the house. The only male would have been my husband, so that would have been ideal.

Clemmie

But it is what it is. Speaking of your headscarves, I was blown away by your... You have a lot of headscarves!

Nilly

I do! I've even tried to Marie Condo those.

Clemmie

Well this is it. You did a brilliant thing - everyone should watch it, where you used the side of an old cot bed to hang your scarves. And after your clear out, you had 70!

Nilly

I know, I know. And then just the other day I was thinking, I'm sure I can get this down to 10 scarves right? Because...

Clemmie

Well I have to say there was a lot in your palate that were pretty close. I mean, I couldn't see the textures of them but these are like my blush coloured ones - yeah you got 10 of those blush ones!

Nilly

[Laughs] And I think I've got, like, 20 different shades off the nude, and I've got about 10 different khaki ones!

Clemmie

I find, and I'm sure you agree that births and having babies of the most life affirming thing that you can do and they often go to your perspective. Has there ever been anything that has made you question your faith?

Nilly

I think once I became a mother and living in western society with what's going on, I've been a bit more conscious about being Muslim and am able to protect my kids if we're out and about? When I had Ascia, my second born, there was a lot in the media about acid being thrown at Muslim women. And I didn't leave the house, I was too scared to go to town and stuff. I don't want to risk it. And if I'm on my own, I look more vulnerable. Being a Muslim woman in a predominantly white area with two little kids, I could have been an easy target. So at that time it was: 'should I keep my scarf on?'

Clemmie

Really?

Nilly

That was probably the first time that I ever questioned it. Because I identify straight away as muslim but without scarf, you can't tell I'm muslim. I could be any faith like I could be Hindu and Sikh wherever, but you wouldn't know I'm Muslim. So I was thinking, should I take it off to protect my kids and stuff, but I didn't take it off. I just stayed at home, which I don't know if that's worse or not.

Clemmie

And how long did you do that for?

Nilly

For a couple of months... Yeah I just stayed local.

Clemmie

And then how did you begin to make steps to get back out there?

Nilly

Well I just feel like God's there to protect us. So if that's what's gonna happen to me, it will happen. But I just I can't hide away based on them. Like it's not fair on the kids. So I just had to, like, be brave a bit and just go to safe places with loads of people and just hope for the best.

Clemmie

But also, that's coupled with a time when every time you have a baby, you kind of feel - well for me, even with the 3rd one it surprised me - your confidence goes anyway, doesn't it? And the outside world can become increasingly scary. And the opposite end of the scale, has there ever been anything that's really cemented your faith for you?

Nilly

I didn't start praying until I was 21 so you've got to pray five times a day. It was just the people I was around, I was at uni and I'm really into like communities and vibes, and it was just a nice vibe. And everytime I prayed, I felt a bit of relief - I would cry, and I have all these worries taken off my shoulders.

Clemmie

I mean, I think a lot of people now are on board with meditation, and it comes from a similar mindful place.

Nilly

Well, it's come out recently that the motion of being in like a ball position for five minutes is really good for you. In our faith we do that so many times when you're praying like the motion. And it is basically like yoga, up and down, stretching...

Clemmie

Yoga and mindfulness, which loads people understand.

Nilly

It's just like peace, isn't it? Like it's your time to reflect.

Clemmie

Which I think all of us in modern cultures find that we're increasingly losing that ability to stop, reflect, be quiet with ourselves and, yeah, especially when you've got three kids.

Nilly

Also praying: I find when I'm praying, I'm much more disciplined with life. But once kids are thrown in...

Clemmie

But do you, you find that it enables you to be more structured? And last question: what are your hopes for your children In terms of their faith?

Nilly

I find if I can guide them the right way now and they just follow my lead as opposed to me saying to them: 'you have to eat that chicken cause it's Halal, not that one.' and follow my guidance. I've always grown up with the idea that I'd rather be inspired by someone than someone putting it down my throat: 'you have to do x y z about our faith.' So I'd rather live my life how I feel is right Islamically and then they pick it up themselves because they can see how good it is. How my behavior is good, Islamically - like a good role model, basically. And for my daughter, if she wants to wear a headscarf, she can wear it, but I would never force it on her. Because I didn't put mine on until I was about 24.

Clemmie

And we all know as parents that the things you force your kids to do, are the things they're going to push against.

Nilly

Yeah, yeah. See, my parents never forced faith onto me and I only stumbled upon it when I was 21 and that's because of the friends I chose.

Clemmie

Yeah, when for the first time in your life you've got is open opportunity...

Nilly

Yeah exactly, and the first time I met Muslims as well.

Clemmie

But also you can't force faith, can you? Because that comes from within yourself. So we're getting towards the end and I found it fascinating talking to you and finding out a bit more about your culture. I feel marginally less naive and it's helped me shed some light on my faith. But I also wanted to know other people thought so. I asked the good people of Instagram. First of all, I asked him if they had faith. 48% of them said yes, but only 33% said that was linked to a God. I then asked him to complete this sentence: Faith is...? 'A belief in anything that gives you a direction', 'trusting the process', 'the reality of what is hopeful versus the proof of what is not seen', 'it's trust', 'it's believing in yourself', 'it's necessary', 'important but also personal', 'the calming and grounding sense of belonging to something that is greater than yourself', 'there when you need it', 'it's within yourself', 'It's a way of life', 'believing that everything will be okay', 'hope, optimism and acceptance of all', 'not always constant, but it ebbs and flows', 'it's like a seed: if nourished, it will grow', 'love for all humans difference and uniqueness', and, of course the inevitable - 'a song by George Michael'. For me my reflection is that it doesn't really matter what you believe - having faith is having somewhere you can go when the going gets tough, something above and beyond everything else that guides you and surely we can all benefit from that. And then this is the bit before the end. As I say love learning about faith and understanding more about what it means to be a modern Muslim. But it's very polite to ask: is there anything you'd like to promote or shout about or anything coming up?

Nilly

Just subscribe to my YouTube channel!

Clemmie

Which is?

Nilly

It's [youtube.com/nillydhalia](https://www.youtube.com/nillydhalia)

Clemmie

But you're not gonna be working too hard on it because you've got a very small baby but you'll be back soon. And the very last question is: who do you wish you could have an honest conversation with, and what would you say? It could be a celebrity, a friend, a God, a younger version of yourself, someone who passed away?

Nilly

Definitely a younger version of me I think. I think I would have told myself to relax and not be so hard on myself about my body image. I feel like every woman is really hard on themselves and I look back on my photos and I'm like I was not fat!

Clemmie

I know! Anyway, it has been so nice talking to you.

Nilly

Thank you for having on!

Clemmie

It was my absolute pleasure. I've been Clemmie Telford, you have been Nilly and this has been Honestly, thank you for listening. Please rate, review, subscribe and tell your mates all about it. Thank you very much!