

SPIRITUALITY AND SHOPPING AT US MUSLIM CONVENTION

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*Riazat Butt explores the annual Islamic Society of North America gathering
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It started as a forum to discuss how to spread the message of Islam, but after more than 40 years the biggest Muslim gathering in North America has become a magnet for consumerism.

Around 40,000 people poured into the Islamic Society of North America's 44th annual convention in Rosemount, Illinois, over the weekend. The huge convention centre was packed with 333 stalls catering for the modern Muslim's every need, including a digital Qur'an audio player, festive Ramadan lights, a pre-packed funeral kit, halal jerky and a mobile phone application that provides daily prayer times for more than 12,000 cities worldwide.

Among the entrepreneurs using the opportunity to market Muslim products was 32-year-old Mansoor Basha, from Chicago, offering a satellite navigation system for Hajj. The Lubaik system aims to help pilgrims locate tents, campsites, hotels, places of interest and hospitals in Mecca and Medina.

Mr Basha says: "I went for Hajj and I had many problems. You don't know Arabic and not everyone speaks English, so it's difficult if you get split up from your tour group and want to find your way back to your hotel. Plus, not all the streets are named, and have you ever tried to find your tent when it looks the same as five million others?"

The handheld device does not have a patent but, he says proudly, it has a registered trademark.

Mr Basha, who visits the convention every year, rejects the idea that the convention is more about shopping than spirituality.

He says: "There are lots of interesting talks and workshops. I don't have time to go because of this stall, but people are there."

The theme for this year's convention was Upholding Faith, Serving Humanity and featured panel discussions and seminars on reinventing the mosque, civic integration and intra-faith dialogue between Sunni and Shia communities.

Despite the array of social, political and religious debates on offer, the bazaar and the 2,500-square-metre food court were consistently packed, and the matrimonial banquet - essentially speed dating with chaperones - pulled in more than 300 Muslims and their parents at \$75 (£37) a head.

A single ticket to the annual convention cost \$95, a husband-and-wife ticket was priced at \$165 and students paid \$40. Stallholders are charged around \$500 for a pitch.

The economic potential at stake was not lost on 36-year-old Khalid Goncalves, from New York.

Mr Goncalves, who was promoting the Qur'anic iPod at \$140, says: "There's nothing wrong with making money out of business. We're not gouging people's eyes out or taking advantage.

"Embracing commerce and technology shows we're not as backward or monolithic as people think. We're not in the seventh century and young people, who are the children of immigrants, have a better understanding of marketing. ISNA is a chance for Muslims to progress."

Other innovations at the convention's bazaar included a Qur'an in Arabic braille and a Muslim punk stall inspired by *The Taqwacores*, a novel about a fictitious Islamic punk scene.

But for the mostly conservative ISNA crowd, Muslim punk appeared to be a step too far.

A veteran convention visitor, Fawad Siddiqui, 28, says the best stalls were the ones that show how activities, chores and rituals can be "Islamicised", and recalls how an alarm clock that emitted a call to prayer five times a day was an instant hit when it was unveiled.

Mr Siddiqui, whose parents were among the early ISNA activists, describes the event as a "big family reunion".

"Muslims in North America are scattered and they rarely meet up, so there's a lot of catching up to do. More importantly, there's a lot of shopping to be done."

Many south Asian Muslims visit Chicago to buy their clothing and jewellery from specialist retailers.

At convention time, he says, "it's a two-for-one scenario: you do your ethnic shopping in town and your religious shopping at ISNA.

"The Muslim American community is commercially motivated - that's why they're in the US, for

the economic opportunity, and they're frank about that. Muslims here want to be upwardly mobile. They don't see it as an evil."

It is this prosperity that has led to greater cohesion and participation in society. A study from the Pew Research Centre showed Muslims in America to be middle class, mainstream and integrated.

"They say green is the colour of Islam and in the US it's taken on a literal aspect - and not in a bad way."

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