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Time now for all to bridge religion, science and technology

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THIS month, two seemingly unrelated international events took place in Malaysia. Both enjoyed great success. The first was the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace exhibition or Lima '97.

The aerial displays of the Royal Malaysian Air Force and Red Arrow teams were some of the major highlights of the biennial event. The six-day exhibition attracted more than 90 exhibitors and participants from over 40 countries. There were 85 aircraft, 60 pleasure craft and 50 ships on display.

Besides the grandeur of the aerobatics and excitement of the maritime show, more solemn activities were conducted on land. Twenty memoranda of understanding were signed between various companies, involved mainly in the business of materials technology, aeronautics, and communications.

The second, albeit more subtle, event was the 39th International Al-Quran Reciters Assembly or IQRA. This year's theme was "Good morality ensures peace for ummah". To produce a society with good morality, its members should be actively involved in the process of learning, education and training. Knowledge-seeking becomes imperative.

Thus, the focus of the recitations was on the importance of knowledge as the means to improve the thinking power of Muslims. This is deemed to be vital as we embark on our journey to build a strong civilization in the digital age.

Among the numerous pages of the Holy Quran recited by the 45 participants throughout the week-long assembly, were verses 77-79 from Surah al-Nahl, which means, "To Allah belongs the mystery of the heavens and the earth. And the decision of judgment is as the twinkling of any eye, or even quicker. For Allah has power over all things. It is He Who brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when you knew nothing. And He gave you hearing and sight and intelligence and affection. That you may give thanks to Allah. Do they not look at the birds, held poised in the midst of the air and the sky? Nothing holds them up but the power of Allah. Verity in this are signs of those who believe."

These beautiful words are a source of inspiration for Muslims to persevere in the quest of knowledge. All knowledge belongs to Allah. Man have been brought into the world in a state of "zero-knowledge". However, they have been bestowed with the basic faculties of listening, seeing, thinking and feeling.

The use of sound, sight and thought described in these verses is not unlike that currently applied in the field of multimedia, an important arm of information technology. Thus, we should make full use of information technology. We must however couple that with our thoughts and feelings in order to ensure that it is used in the correct Islamic perspective.

Realising the strong link between religion and science and technology, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in his message to the 39th IQRA said: "The present rapid development in the field of science and technology is making the world smaller, or better known as the borderless world. In facing this development, Muslims should not be negative but instead should be pro-active by making full use of the available opportunities. The development of information technology and the multimedia storming throughout the world today should be welcomed positively. Islam and its followers can gain a lot if they are smart enough to make use of the development of information technology and

multimedia to their advantage."

In Islam, knowledge and science are synonymous. During the zenith of Islamic civilization from 750 AD to 1050 AD, a high level of understanding and achievement by Muslim scientists in various disciplines, such as physics, mathematics, chemistry and medicine, was recorded. However, science during that era was closely associated with religion. Even the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was reported as saying, "the study of science has the value of fasting, the teaching of science, the value of prayer".

Thomas Cleary penned these words in *The Essential Quran*: "One aspect of Islam that is unexpected yet appealing to the post-Christian secular mind is the harmonious interplay of faith and reason. Islam does not demand unreasoned belief. Rather it invites intelligent faith, growing from observation, reflection and contemplation, beginning with nature and what is all around us. Antagonism between religion and science such as that familiar to Westerners is foreign to Islam.

"In the post-Christian West, where thinking people, including scientists themselves, once more are seeking solutions to the difficulties created by the Christian divorce between religion and science, the Quran offers a way to explore an attitude that fully embraces the quest for knowledge and understanding that is the essence of science, while at the same time, and indeed for the same reasons, fully embraces the awe, humility, reverence, and conscience without which the humankind does indeed go too far in considering itself to be self-sufficient."

Can religion and science and technology meet? A study on "the level of awareness, perception and acceptance of science and technology among Malaysians" conducted under the auspices of the Malaysian Science and Technology Information Centre, Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment, in August 1994, attracted 5,031 respondents. In view of the thesis that there is a dichotomy between science and religion; and the proposition that religion has no role to play in the scientific quest, this statement has been included in the study: "science does not consider religion and ethics". The majority of the respondents appear to disagree with this statement.

Religious scholars and scientists, with an intact tradition of knowledge and belief, are in an excellent position to bridge religion and science and technology.

In actual fact, Lima '97 and the 39th IQRA are clear manifestations of the undisputable link between religion and science and technology, which has contributed both to the social well-being and economic development of society.

Religion and science and technology can exist in tandem. They are not at opposite roles of objectivity and subjectivity. It is time to begin a new and creative interaction between religion and science and technology.