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The promotion and development of scientific and philosophical progress in early Islamic civilization is often commented upon, alongside the Andalusian spirit of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. In some cases, such comments appear as part of an apologetic strategy striving to show that Islam is a tolerant religion, which supports reason and scientific development. This is not strange, considering the widespread Islamophobia and the “war on terror,” where Islam and Muslims are portrayed as anything else but peaceful or scientific and rationally inclined. S. Frederick Starr’s Lost Enlightenment. Central Asia’s Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane does not really seem to be driven by such a motive, but rather purports to show how and why areas East of Baghdad rose to become influential in scientific and philosophic discoveries and advancement.

The Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid, a playboy and jihadist in Starr’s terms, supported translations and science and made Baghdad thrive. One of his sons, Ma’mun, is presented as a more seriously scientific oriented person, who established the House of Wisdom. In this Abbasid Baghdad, a rational dogmatic theology developed, influenced by Hellenism. However, conflicts arose when an inquisition was initiated, supported by the caliph, in favor of the rational theologians. This was considered extremely harmful and wrong by other fundamentalist oriented theologians and jurists, with Ibn Hanbal first in line, who eventually gained the upper hand. After having read the book, a feeling lingers on that Starr mentions this with disappointment. Perhaps this is what made him
write this book, which focuses other parts of the early Islamic civilization, such as present day Iran, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, stretching as far as China, that were prosperous and leading in the scientific and philosophical development between 800–1200.

Through a large historical sweep but also with informed details, Starr introduces a rather tolerant and intellectual climate where people from various faiths and ethnicities co-existed. Historians have already noted the impact on early Islam that non-Arabs had and that other ethnicities contributed to a large extent to the development, which is stressed in the book. Various explanations to the rise of this golden age of Central Asia and the flowering of intellectual life are offered. It is portrayed as a part of a globalized world where material prosperity characterized at least the larger towns. Cities had infrastructure and advanced water systems that supported the large populations. Trade was vivid and connected large parts of the world. The Silk Road made goods and people from different cultural and religious backgrounds travel wide distances. Hence, material richness and the acquaintance with new thoughts and new ways of thinking are causes that Starr draws on to explain the development of science and philosophy.

But what was this intellectual life about? In Starr’s description, we can note that it moves very much between two poles, namely faith and knowledge. The relationship between theology and philosophy is accentuated, but also that of empirical science and faith based claims to knowledge. Many philosophers argued for the need of using reason, seemingly questioning religious truth claims, but they also maintained that religion and philosophy were two distinct spheres. Many examples are also given on discoveries in medicine, mathematics, and astronomy, but also developments in art, poetry and architecture.

A contributing reason to the development was the many local leaders who supported science and philosophy, because they were themselves interested or because it gave them prestige. They were largely ruling autonomously from Baghdad and a tolerance and openness seems to have been widespread, which assisted the advancement of this high culture. However, this climate successively changed. When Starr ends the book he argues that we should focus on what this eastern civilization has accomplished, instead of concentrating on reasons to its demise. However, he too seems very eager to find causal explanations. He speculates into various reasons where two stand out; the Mongols and vanished pluralism. The Mongol invasion caused severe material and ecological
damages and is a main reason for the downfall of this Central Asian high culture. However, the second cause seems to be the most important in Starr’s view, the disintegration of religious pluralism that had characterized the area. He writes disapproving of the influential Sunni theologian al-Ghazzali, whom he calls “the dark genius.” His criticism of philosophy and science in favor of religion made dogmatism develop, influenced by Sufism. Starr mentions though that Averroes (Ibn Rushd) criticized al-Ghazzali, but to no avail. It was too late. The Islamic civilization has since the Mongols and al-Ghazzali been lagging behind, regarding both intellectual and material life. Here too, we can sense a discontent between the lines with the development. One also senses a warning aimed for the world what may happen if pluralism is not upheld.

Starr, a historian with a focus on Eurasia and Russian, lets us know in the introduction of the book that he is not really competent to write this book, since he does not know Arabic or Persian and nor he is a philosopher. The book therefore builds on secondary material and translations. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, the book has turned into a valuable introduction to early Islamic civilization and science, which brings to light the often neglected eastern parts, without becoming too detailed. The language constitutes for a delightful reading and the book’s many illustrations make the world which Starr recreates more vivid. It is a truly entertaining read. Despite being over 600 pages, this book could well serve as an introduction to students into many central aspects of the early Islamic civilization east of Baghdad. This is not the least important considering that Islamic studies often focus the Middle Eastern countries and Arabic Islam, in spite of the fact that many other geographical areas and ethnicities had a large and important role, today and in history.