Ideological Extremism and the Destruction of Cultural Heritage
(The Traditional Muslim Response)

The destruction of heritage through historical and ideological hatred - the insane wish to erase a civilization - is a monstrous thing. All Bosnians have direct and terrible living memories of this kind of cultural atrocity. The reminders are all around you. However, across most of the Islamic world the destruction of our heritage is not from an external enemy but from an enemy within. On the surface the process of extirpating Islamic heritage from most of our societies is driven by commercialism, modernism and dynastic hubris and aided by corruption, apathy and ignorance. Yet beneath the surface there’s a deep ideological hatred of Islamic history, culture and traditional knowledge at work that has spread through Muslim societies like a virus. This ideology encourages and, indeed, promotes the destruction of our traditional heritage. And it describes itself as Salafi.

The term Salafi has become a euphemism for the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab, the 18th century Bedouin renegade who invented a kind of atavistic version of Islam that claimed to bring the religion back to its original, pristine form and repudiated 1,200 years of Islamic history, culture and scholarship.

I don’t have time here to get into the history and evolution of salafism but I will say this: although not all salafis are violent extremists or Jihadis, all violent extremists and Jihadis are salafis.
In the early 1990s I was writing a series of films about the expansion of the Prophet’s Mosque in Al Madinah Al Munawwara and spending weeks at a time in this sacred city. The new mosque was to cover the entire site of the original City of the Prophet. The surrounding districts had already been demolished to make way for the vast expansion. One site had been left untouched: the Ottoman-era library of Hikmat Aref, a jewel of a structure adjacent to the Prophet’s mosque. There was a lot of pressure on the Saudi government to preserve this beautiful building and a plan had been commissioned to encompass the library into the mosque complex. So, that’s what we thought would happen.

Our team had been working into the night and returned to the hotel in the early hours of the morning. We went into the restaurant to have a pre-dawn meal and discovered the demolition crew. We joined them. “What are you doing here at this time of night?” We asked. “We just demolished the Hikmat Aref Library.” “Why?” we asked. The cover story was that the structure was too old and weak and wasn’t safe to preserve but the demolition engineers told us a different story. They confided to us that it was the strongest building they had ever attempted to demolish. And what did the destruction of the Library make way for? - A car park.

This kind of thing has been happening in Saudi Arabia for many decades: demolition in the dead of night - a fait accompli.

The Saudi government has had a long-term policy of systematically eradicating every trace of the Ottoman past. It is not so much
motivated by religious zeal as by historical revisionism, vainglory and greed. But the ideology of hatred that is rooted in Saudi Arabia’s official theology encourages and validates all these cultural depredations.

During the same period the Saudi authorities planned to demolish the historic 16th century Ottoman section of the Haram Sharif in Makkah. We rushed a film crew out to capture the last images of Sinan Pasha’s masterpiece before it disappeared forever. At the Eleventh Hour the Turkish government registered a strong and very public protest and the Sinan mosque was saved. But the writing was on the wall. In 2014 they tore down most of the Sinan mosque. By this time, 95% of all historical traces in Makkah had been destroyed.

When Sinan designed the Holy Mosque in the 16th century he was asked why the structure was so low and humble. He replied that no building in Makkah should be higher than the Ka’aba. He had a powerful sense of the sacredness of the House of God.

To me the most nauseating aspect of all the building in Makkah today is the architectural gigantism surrounding the Holy Mosque. Everything is brazenly out of scale. The looming towers and gargantuan complexes around the Haram blindly violate the humbling metaphysical realities of the House of God. In Makkah commerce and ostentation trump holiness. This desacralizing trend in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere across the Muslim world is directly linked to the same extremist ideology that underpins Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.
Since 2011 extremists have been ransacking and demolishing traditional mosques, madrasahs, museums, shrines and antiquities throughout Libya, Syria and Iraq.

A couple of years ago, a salafi gang with heavy construction equipment rolled up to a traditional mosque in Libya and began tearing it down. A young Libyan theologian confronted the heavy bearded and heavily armed extremists. He tried to reason with them. “Why do you have to destroy this mosque? If you don’t like it, why not just close it up and build a wall around it?” One grinning salafi replied, “Because we want to completely erase the memory that this place ever existed.”

Wherever they hold sway, these same ignorant bullies are destroying every trace of traditional heritage they can. Most grotesquely, they are disinterring the bodies of great saints, dismembering them, and scattering their remains, to “completely erase” their memory.

The rise of extremism is directly related to the overwhelming and truly frightening ignorance of Muslims around the world, and I’m not just speaking about the unschooled. I mean our religious and political leaders as well as academics steeped in scientism.

Few people are aware of the fact that 99.5 per cent of all existing written manuscripts in the Muslim world have never, ever been published. That means that we have access to only 0.5 percent of our traditional knowledge. There are works of Imam Bukhari and Ibn Khaldun that have never been published. Works on
architecture by Mimar Sinan have not been published. In the West we know everything there is to know about Shakespeare. Every shred of scholarship has been unearthed on the Bard and studied and re-studied. Yet, our own literary treasures are moldering away in warehouses across the Muslim world. In Egypt’s Dar Al Kutoob, which houses hundreds of thousands of rare and priceless manuscripts, many works are disappearing, being sold off by the very people who are supposed to be protecting them.

There is a project to digitize all these manuscripts before they are eaten by worms or rats or sold off by corrupt officials. The entire project worldwide is estimated to cost around 300 million euros. I can tell you that it is highly unlikely that the project will ever be adequately funded.

Meanwhile, in 2012 the State of Qatar famously purchased a painting by Cezanne for $250 million, which was, at the time, far and away the highest price ever paid for a work of art. What was the painting of? – Two peasants playing cards with a bottle of wine on the table between them. Would the State of Qatar finance the digitization of the Muslim world’s literary treasures? I doubt it.

In my view the single greatest tragedy that has afflicted the Muslim world and that has led to this tragic situation we find ourselves in, is that over the last century and a half our profoundly rich spiritual tradition has been almost totally removed from the mainstream of Islam. The spiritual tradition of Islam – what we call Din Al Ihsan – infuses in believers an immediate and palpable sense of the sacred and creates a thirst for knowledge. The spiritual tradition in Islam
leads to a deep sense of the presence of the Divine, which leads to illumination. Illumination leads to the perfection of beautiful character. Beautiful character translates into our lived, material world in the form of spiritual courtesy, deep love and compassion, humility, tolerance for others, wisdom, clarity, love of beauty and reverence for knowledge.

Throughout the history of Islam, the reference points for Muslims have always been those men and women who have achieved illumination and have become Friends of God, awliya’ullah. These people and the practices that shape them have been relegated to the frontiers of the faith. In the extremist universe, they are pantheists, idolaters and infidels. A century of Salafi and modernist propaganda has conditioned ordinary Muslims to shy away from spirituality and deny the existence of men and women of spiritual knowledge. But our heritage of traditional scholarship in everything, from the material sciences to jurisprudence, is steeped in spirituality and metaphysics.

In my view, there needs to be a concentrated effort to restore the spirituality of traditional Islam to the mainstream in a way that will address the needs and aspirations of young people throughout the Muslim world. We have been abdicating our responsibility. Our rightly guided scholars and sages must learn how to use contemporary media and communicate to young people in languages that they can understand. Extremists have dominated the social media space for years. Salafi interests own almost every religious television satellite channel in the Muslim world. Salafi publications now flood bookstores and libraries from Morocco to
Malaysia. Salafi-influenced governments have financed schools and mosques around the world. These moves need to be countered as a matter of urgency. We need to recapture our young people’s hearts with messages of love, tolerance, kindness, compassion and beauty so that they can understand the sanctity of life and treasure and preserve the sacred heritage that is disappearing before our eyes.

(This paper was delivered by Michael Sugich at a conference held in Mostar, Bosnia in 2015)