

Why CNN's Reza Aslan Shouldn't Eat Human Brains



By Alex Berezow, PhD — March 7, 2017



Credit: Alewis2388/Wikipedia [1]

In a recent documentary, religion scholar Reza Aslan [ate a small piece of human brains](#) [2]. That was inadvisable.

The purpose of his six-episode CNN series "Believer," according to the *Los Angeles Times* [3], is to explore misunderstood faiths. Of course, given the choice of good journalism or sensationalism, Dr. Aslan chose the latter. In one episode, he hung out with the Aghoris, a small, fringe Hindu cult with extremely bizarre practices that are meant as a rebuke to mainstream Hindu beliefs about purity.

Dr. Aslan [says](#) [4] they:

...tak[e] part in ostentatious displays of defilement. They will cover themselves in the ashes of the dead. They will eat rotted corpses. They will drink their own urine. They will sleep within the cremation grounds.

That's not all. A prior [CNN](#) [5] report also noted that they "consume feces" and "drink out of human skulls." The interview comes to an interesting conclusion when Dr. Aslan's Aghori host says, "I will cut off your head if you keep talking so much."

To be fair, that's probably not the first time he's heard that.

The Science of Eating Brains and Feces

It probably goes without saying that [many Hindus were rather upset with CNN](#) [6]. And for good reason. The nauseating practices of the Aghoris shed no light on a faith practiced by more than

one billion people.

Science also has something to say about the Aghoris. Humans naturally find certain things, like death and feces, repulsive. This isn't just because of culture or religion; instead, we seem to have an innate aversion to "gross" things. Why? Because gross things often carry disease.

Though incredibly rare, eating brains caused kuru, the human equivalent of mad cow disease, among a cannibalistic tribe in Papua New Guinea. Quite likely, the [epidemic began with a person](#) [7] who had [Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease](#) [8] (CJD), a type of rare brain disorder that is caused by a misfolded protein. This protein, called [prion](#) [9], is infectious. When this person died and the tribe consumed his brain, they became infected. When they died, and the ritual cannibalism continued, the disease spread even further.

In general, eating brains or nervous tissue is not a brilliant idea. The mad cow disease outbreak was probably caused by [cows that were fed ground up cow parts](#) [10], including nervous system tissue. When these cows became beef, the meat was contaminated with prion.

Much more so than brains, feces is often full of pathogens. We are evolutionarily programmed to find feces absolutely revolting. People who eat feces (a practice called coprophagia) are likely experiencing some type of mental illness.

The More You Know

In regard to the dietary and lifestyle choices of the Aghoris, Dr. Aslan concluded, "It's an idea that's very difficult for everyday Indians to take part of."

Ya think?

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Links

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aghori#/media/File:Agori_Tribe.jpg

[2] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/03/06/reza-aslan-host-of-cnns-believer-catches-flack-for-showcasing-religious-cannibals-in-india/>

[3] <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-et-st-believer-reza-aslan-review-20170304-story.html>

[4] <http://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2017/02/27/believer-reza-aslan-who-are-aghori-sahdus-india-orig-ff.cnn/video/playlists/believer-with-reza-aslan/>

[5] <http://travel.cnn.com/explorations/life/when-taboo-not-taboo-worlds-oddest-practices-001718/>

[6] <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/hindu-americans-oppose-negative-portrayal-of-hinduism-by-cnn/story-6tmTailteF645LVqqL1FcJ.html>

[7] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5120877/>

[8] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creutzfeldt%E2%80%93Jakob_disease

[9] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PRNP>

[10] <https://www.fda.gov/AnimalVeterinary/ResourcesforYou/AnimalHealthLiteracy/ucm136222.htm>