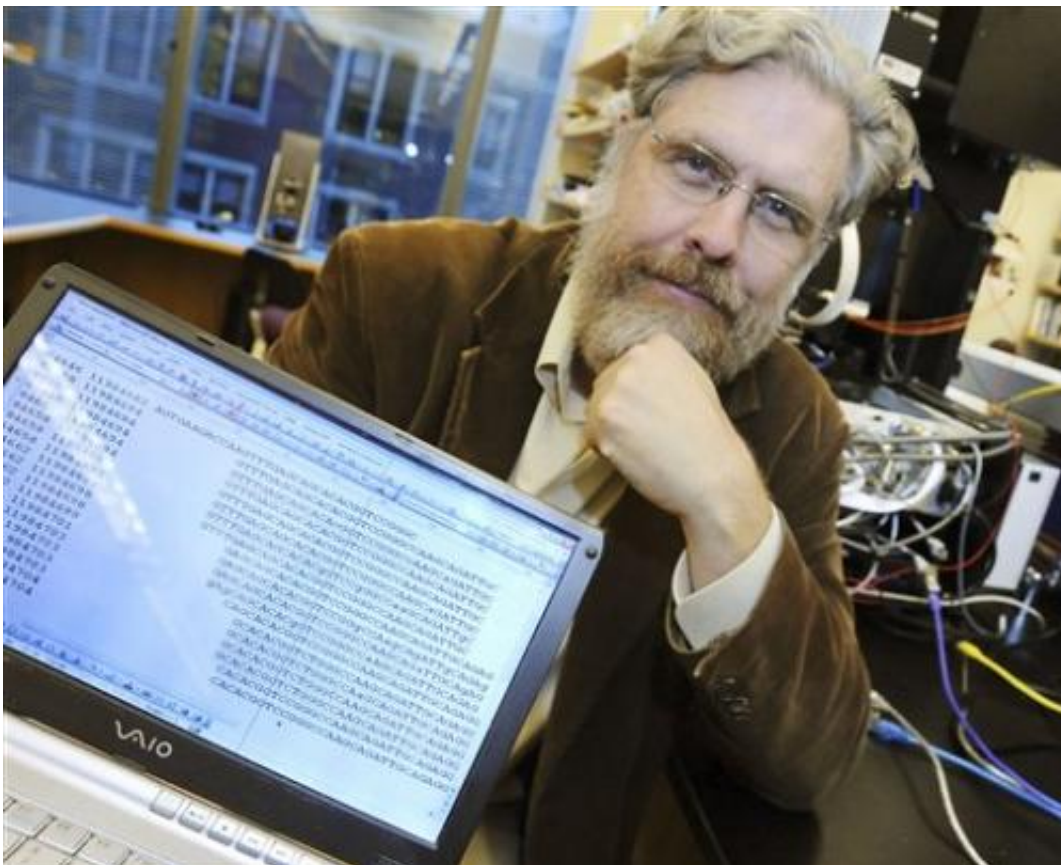


Scientist: I'm NOT seeking a mom for a Neanderthal

January 22 2013, by Malcolm Ritter



In this Oct. 20, 2008 file photo, Harvard Medical School genetics professor George Church poses for a photo with DNA sequence data for Dr. John Halamka, chief information officer, following a news conference in Boston. Church says reports that made him sound like he was searching for a woman to bear a Neanderthal baby are based on misunderstandings of an interview he gave the German magazine Der Spiegel. Church said the idea of bringing back Neanderthals gets brief mention as a theoretical possibility in his recent book, "Regenesis: How Synthetic Biology Will Reinvent Nature and Ourselves." (AP

Photo/Lisa Poole, File)

A prominent genetics expert from Harvard Medical School wants to make one thing perfectly clear: He is NOT looking for a woman to bear a Neanderthal baby. Not even an adventurous one.

"Definitely not," said George Church.

Is he advocating for creating a Neanderthal? No. Does he plan to pursue such a project? "We have no projects, no plans, we have no papers, no grants," to do that, he said in a telephone interview Tuesday.

You wouldn't know that from some press reports that shot around the Internet the past few days, which made Church sound like he was supporting the idea and even looking for an "adventurous" woman to bear the Neanderthal child.

Church says those reports are based on misunderstandings of an interview he gave the German magazine Der Spiegel. The publication had approached him to talk about his recent book, "Regenesi: How Synthetic Biology Will Reinvent Nature and Ourselves."

Church said the idea of bringing back Neanderthals gets brief mention as a theoretical possibility, and the book refers to an "adventurous" woman merely to point out that the process would require a woman who no doubt would be adventurous.

"It said you're going to need someone like that if you're going to do it," he said. "It's certainly very different from taking out a want ad."

Neanderthals were stocky, muscular hunters who lived in Europe and

western Asia. They died out sometime after modern humans arrived in Europe, which occurred some 40,000 to 45,000 years ago.

Scientists have recovered DNA from Neanderthal fossils. Making a Neanderthal would start with putting such DNA into human cells. They would be used to make an embryo, which would be carried to term by a surrogate mother, Church said.

Such a process would face ethical questions involving respect for the mother and child, as well as safety issues, and it would also require societal approval, Church said.

Scientists have long talked about bringing back long-extinct animals, such as by recovering genes from the remains of mammoths and using elephants as surrogate mothers. That has its own ethical issues, although not as troubling as a Neanderthal project, Church said.

Although he's not saying that a Neanderthal project is necessarily a good idea, "I think it is up for discussion, and hopefully for several years we can have a calm discussion about it," Church said. "It's way better to think of these things in advance."

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