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1

Citing ‘nerd tunnel vision,’ biologist George Church apologizes for contacts with Jeffrey Epstein

By [Sharon Begley](#)² [@sxbegle](#)³

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Kayana Szymczak for STAT

George Church, the prominent Harvard University biologist, offered a full-throated apology for having meetings and phone calls with accused sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein even after the financier pleaded guilty in 2008 to soliciting a minor for prostitution.

“I certainly apologize for my poor awareness and judgment,” Church told STAT in his first public comments about Epstein.

Expressing regret that he and other scientists weren't more cautious in their dealings with Epstein, he said: "There should have been more conversations about, should we be doing this, should we be helping this guy? There was just a lot of nerd tunnel vision."

He added, "My main concern is for the people who have been hurt," the girls and young women Epstein was accused last month of having brought to his Manhattan and Palm Beach, Fla., homes for sex (a charge Epstein denies).

Since the indictment last month, news reports have described numerous meetings Epstein organized, both before and after his 2008 conviction, with physicists, biologists, mathematicians, and other researchers. He seemed to believe his interactions with scientists, especially those at Harvard, would buff his reputation in the financial world, saying on his website that he had "the privilege of sponsoring many prominent scientists."

Asked how so many of them could have associated with Epstein after his guilty plea and 13-month sentence, Church said that scientists "might not have realized the enormity of his transgressions," especially since Epstein seemed to be welcomed back into society after he served his sentence. "That's my most generous interpretation."

In addition, he said, scientists are as vulnerable to flattery and attention from prominent people as anyone. "If it's a rich person [asking about their research], that's cool," Church said. "Or if it's a politician or a movie star, [scientists] would be flattered if they took time out of their own activities to learn something about quasars or recombinant DNA."

As for whether Epstein's 2008 conviction gave Church (a father and grandfather) pause, he said, "I did read a couple of news articles" a decade ago, he said, "but they weren't clear enough for me to know there was a serious problem." (The full extent of Epstein's crimes came out in an investigation by the Miami Herald in 2018; in the New York Times, a 2006 [story](#)⁶ describing Epstein's not-guilty plea ran on A19, and one in 2008 characterized the allegations as "involving massages with teenage girls"). "But that is still no excuse for me not being abreast of the news."

Church said he is used to financiers, technologists, and celebrities seeking him out, and has become a quasi-celebrity himself. In his distinctive Darwinesque beard, he has had [star turns](#)⁷ on "The Colbert Report," was named to the [Time 100](#)⁸ in 2017, made his genome sequence public, and has been featured on "NOVA" and other television science programs. But Church also has unquestioned [scientific gravitas](#)⁹, having helped develop genome sequencing as well as CRISPR genome editing, and founded or advised dozens of biotech companies.

Now, Church is the only science luminary to publicly apologize for interactions with Epstein.

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Many influential scientists met Epstein through New York literary agent John Brockman, who, starting in 1999, hosted an annual "[billionaires dinner](#)¹¹" where some of his authors mingled with moguls. Epstein

attended several of the dinners from 2000 to 2011, and Brockman described him on his online salon Edge.org as a “science philanthropist.”

Church, whose 2012 book “Regenesis” Brockman shepherded, said he met Epstein in 2006, either through Brockman or through the then-chairman of the Harvard psychology department, Stephen Kosslyn, a member¹² of Edge.org.

He confirmed NBC’s recent report¹³ that he had six phone calls and meetings with Epstein in 2014, as shown in Church’s online calendar (he has posted one every year since 1999). Sample entry: “Jun 21, 2014 Lunch w/ Jeffrey Epstein, 12-1:30, Martin Nowak’s Institute.” (Nowak, a Harvard biologist/mathematician, is also a Brockman client and Edge participant¹⁴.) He also met with Epstein “several times” each year since, Church said. (Brockman and Nowak could not be reached for comment over the weekend.)

Asked what interested Epstein about Church’s work, Church paused before saying, “I don’t think he picked me. So in that sense he may not have been that interested.”

Instead, many of his meetings with Epstein were with Nowak, to whose then-fledgling Program for Evolutionary Dynamics Epstein contributed \$6.5 million in 2003, five years before his guilty plea. Church and Nowak have worked together on, among other things, the evolution of CRISPR-based gene drives¹⁵. At the get-togethers with Nowak, Church said, Epstein seemed interested in the science of life’s origins and mathematically modeling the evolution of viruses, cancer cells, and life itself. Epstein did not leave much of an impression on him, Church said: “The meetings weren’t really about Jeffrey, they were about

the scientists who were talking with each other. Normally, expectations are low for people who listen in on meetings far outside their field of expertise.”

Church knew nothing about Epstein’s desire in the early 2000s to establish a eugenics program, he said. According to¹⁶ the New York Times, Epstein hoped that multiple women would be inseminated with his sperm. Church has done boundary-pushing research on “recoding life” (to, among other things, make cells resistant to viruses) and argued that making heritable changes in the genomes of embryos should not be off the table, which might have made him a sounding board for eugenic fantasies.

But “I never heard anything about it,” Church said. “I’d have thought that I would have been involved in that kind of conversation, but it didn’t tend to go in that direction. But also, I think people tend to behave themselves around me.”

A longtime associate of Church’s seemed surprised that he became involved with Epstein, since Church has prioritized ethics. (The associate declined to be named in a story about Epstein.) Church invited a philosopher¹⁷ to work in his lab to flag bioethics issues in experiments, and for years has taught a research ethics course, which is unusual for someone of his prominence.

Universities are supposed to vet potential donors who ask to meet with a faculty member, especially if they want to fund research. Epstein made a donation to Church’s lab for “cutting edge science and education” from 2005 to 2007. “My understanding is this [vetting] is the responsibility of the development office, which is yet another reason why scientists are a little bit more relaxed,” Church said. “They feel they have administrators, who in theory do the difficult job of figuring out who’s legit.” Epstein’s donation went into

what Church called “a general account used to get new projects going before we have enough preliminary data to warrant a formal grant application.”

Scientists, “myself included, are not very good” at screening out people, he said. “I think many of them also feel an exceptionalism,” meaning that they should be allowed to associate with anyone if it is for a greater good. He recalled how in the 1990s renowned molecular biologist and Nobel laureate Sydney Brenner, who died in April at age 92, defended the \$15 million he accepted from cigarette giant Philip Morris for a biology institute in California that he’d founded, arguing that basic science was a better cause than other uses the company might have for its millions.

Did he believe Epstein had “paid his debt to society” in 2008 and deserved another chance? “As far as I know people just didn’t have that conversation,” Church said. “But it should have.”

Scientists’ feeling that they cannot be morally tainted by their associations, however, “may not be rational, or helpful, or correct,” Church allowed. Still, he added, “I would like to think that people’s reputation is multidimensional and multiyear — that it takes a long time to build up but also to tear down.” He was speaking both generally and about himself.

Correction: An earlier version of this story inaccurately described Epstein’s donations to Church’s lab. He contributed unrestricted funding from 2005 to 2007.

About the Author



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