

**Gary Younge, New York correspondent for "The Guardian."**

*(Unedited Transcript)*

MR. YOUNGE: Well, I want to thank you first for inviting me. I'm the first speaker who actually didn't know Father Baroni. I was 15 when he died and living in England, which is where I was born and grew up. Although I was at that time cutting my political teeth, supporting the miners who were on strike, in England against a government that was led by Margaret Thatcher which openly believed, she said, "There's no such thing as society, only individuals and their families." And so even though I never knew Father Baroni I feel very much, in fighting against that kind of ideology and logic, to be an intellectual or political heir of sorts.

So I'm gonna start not with a reference or an anecdote to Father Baroni or his generation, but one from mine, which is the film, "The Matrix." In the film, "The Matrix," there is a character called Morpheus, played by Lawrence Fishburne. And he offers Neo, who's played by Keanu Reeves, a stark choice.

He tells Neo he can either gain a greater understanding of the complex forces that comprise the world in which he lives, or he can continue in a state of imperiled ignorance, as though they don't exist.

He says, "You take the blue pill and the story ends. You wake up in your bed and you believe whatever you want to believe. Or you can take the red pill, and you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes."

So I want to concentrate my comments regarding public morality, conventional wisdom, and the work of the late Father Geno Baroni, on the fallout from Hurricane Katrina, which I covered for "the Guardian." And hopefully in the process I'll say that if not directly, that indirectly, some of the questions we were given to answer.0039

Because it seemed to me as though when it came to hurricane Katrina, the United States was handed the red pill, and it was forced to swallow hard. Now, it didn't show us a rabbit hole that we didn't know existed. We've always known that there were poor people in this country, and that African-Americans were overrepresented among them, and if we didn't know them, we simply weren't paying attention. But it revealed just how deep that rabbit hole can go, and just how ugly and deadly it can get.

The most concrete basis I believe for public morality must be a belief that there are public needs, and that those are satisfied by public goods and services, and that the principal, the principal purveyor of those goods and services will be government. Not the sole purveyor, because it can and should work in partnership with everybody it can to achieve its ends, but the principal one because it should be accountable in a way, democratically in a way that nothing else is.

And so those who don't believe in government, or believe in a government that is weak and small, will always I believe have a problem developing a coherent and comprehensive approach to public morality.

And I think this is precisely what happened with Katrina. For the lack of preparation before the hurricane and the inability to cope with the fallout afterwards was entirely the

result of small government. It was an inadequate, privatized response to a massive public problem.

Before we even knew what name the hurricane would carry, New Orleans was vulnerable because the government had slashed the investment needed to reinforce the levees. This was I believe what you might call a "faith-based lack of initiative." There was a hope that nature might spare us because we had been insufficiently perspicacious to help ourselves. And they will agree, those cuts were made in the name of homeland security which, for me as a foreigner, raises the question of what type of homeland these people are intent on securing, and what state it will be in even if they succeed.

And when those banks were breached I think it -- and this is as a black person who is foreign, often it seems to me an America that people treat racial distinctions not as though they are constructed, but as though they are real, as though there really is some deep-seated difference between black and white people beyond the difference that we have made, and the melanin which colors our bodies, and the apparent fixed differences seem to be washed away with the breaching of the levees, and people united not in a common cause but in a common condition. And that condition was poverty.

And it was that condition that, from everything I've read and everything I've heard, that as a latent force means nothing, but as a mobilized force gives potential for great and effective political action.

So the effect of that lack of preparedness continued after the flooding. As tens of thousands of people converged on the convention center in town, the head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Michael Brown, admitted that he did not know they were there. In a rare moment of candor, he confessed, "we're seeing people that we didn't know exist."

Indeed, these were people that I would argue people like Michael Brown, his administration, and indeed some in the city of New Orleans, have long tried to forget. "No one would have checked on a lot of black people in these parishes while the sun shines," Said Mayor Milton Tutwiler of Winstonville, Mississippi, "so am I surprised no one has come to help us now? No."

The treatment of those left behind exposed a fundamental fault line, I believe, in American society, that had failed to even arise as an issue during the 2004 election. Notably, that within this overdeveloped and very mighty superpower, there's a series of autonomous, underdeveloped islands, that have been left without resources to govern themselves, like failed states. Black infant mortality in Louisiana is the same as in Sri Lanka. But judging by GDP per capita, America is the second richest country in the world after Luxembourg, while Sri Lanka is the 142nd richest, after Jamaica. Sri Lankans earn one tenth of the average American.

And the huge amount of wealth in this country, and the concurrent huge amount of despair is a constant source of amazement and intrigue for me, and I read this from Father Baroni, he said: "If we've got the technology and we've got the resources, the gross national product, and the economic know-how, what's missing? Something that's missing is the soul, the guts. How do we create that? When you go in Newark and you see a city that's dying, see people there who don't believe that it can live, even if a doctor told them

so, even if we had all the money.” And I think for “Newark,” you can read “New Orleans,” both before and in many ways after the flood.

But the trouble we talk about averages is that the 43widening gap between rich and poor in this country makes the very notion of an average American almost entirely abstract.

Now that to me blows a hole in the conventional wisdom that underpins the American dream, and that is that this is a land of unflinching progress for all. A nation of unequal wealth which is justified because supposedly there is equal opportunity. A country of tall bootstraps and rugged individualism, where anyone who works hard enough can make it.

But the trouble is that the inability of the poor and the black to make it out of New Orleans reflected not just a lack of geographical mobility, but social mobility. Those who couldn't get out were also the people afterwards, were the people who couldn't get on before.

So I went beyond the much-discussed subject of race to the subject that feels to me to be virtually an American taboo, which is class. Now in Britain, we know quite a bit about class. Whatever you might think about the democratic credentials of George Bush following the 2000 election, you might bring them into question. There is no question about the democratic credentials of our head of state, 'cause our head of state is the Queen, and we don't question her 44democratic credentials because she doesn't claim to have any.

But things are supposed to be different here. Things are supposed to be, I'd always thought and actually often still feel that America was a different place. My parents are from Barbados. Some went to England and others went to America. Those who went to America had a different experience in terms of the human relationships they had than the people who went to England. More of their children ended up, more of my cousins ended up in college, for example.

But a recent study comparing the incomes and occupations of 2,750,000 fathers and sons from the seventies to the nineties showed that social mobility in the US has decreased to a rate not too different from Europe's. Meanwhile, only three percent of students of the country's most selective universities come from the bottom 25 percent of earners.

So if the poor have serious problems progressing, the rich seem to have none in storming ahead. According to "Fortune" magazine, the average real annual compensation for the top hundred CEOs in America went from \$1.3 million -- or 40 times the average worker's salary in 1970 -- two more than a thousand times the average worker's salary in 1998.0045

By the beginning of the century, writes Kevin Phillips in “Wealth and Democracy,” the US had become the west citadel of inherited wealth. Aristocracy was a cultural and economic fact.

And so in short, despite all of the claims of meritocracy, the most reliable indicator of what you can do in America seems to be what your parents, and in particular, what your father did. And nowhere is this more evident than in America's political class. President George Bush, Teamsters union leader, Jimmy Hoffa, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley,

Southern Christian Leadership Conference leader Martin Luther King; all carried not only the same names but the same job titles that their fathers did.

And that these developments took place alongside a concerted assault on affirmative action is nothing if not ironic. The argument I've most heard of put forward by the right, and indeed by this administration to the Supreme Court two years ago against the University of Michigan's admissions policies, that the best person should get the job; yet another piece of conventional wisdom.

It usually just happens that the best person for the job is either them, their children, or their friends. Dick Cheney went scouring the nation for the best vice president and came up with himself. Harriet Myers went looking for the next judge for the Supreme Court and came up with herself. When Fred Murkowski was elected governor of Alaska, he searched the state far and wide for a successor for his Senate seat. "I felt the person I appoint should be someone who shares my basic philosophy, my values," he said, and then he named his daughter, Lisa Murkowski, as his successor. "Your mother and I are very proud," he said.

So, the notion of private entitlement to dole out public posts, exemplified by the nomination of Ms. Myers and the appointment of Mr. Brown, whose previous experience was with Arabian horses, to the leadership of FEMA, by his former flatmate, both denigrates public-service, and engenders cynicism in the potential for public morality.

And finally there is the budget, which Father Baroni referred to as a "moral document." And the conventional wisdom seems to have been -- not just in America but also in Britain -- that where budget is concerned, taxes can only fall, they can never go up. And it follows, or at least it should follow, that public spending must then fall alongside it. But for the longest time, such logic has not held with this administration, which was the only one to cut taxes during a war.

But with the regeneration of the Gulf Coast demanding massive public investment following Katrina, the issue of the ballooning national debt has reasserted itself. Now the logical response, I believe, and one in keeping with Father Baroni's principles, with which he lived his life, would be to reverse those tax cuts. But the approach of the ruling party has been to make further cuts in spending that will adversely affect the poor: the rich buying themselves out of a crisis by making the poorest pay.

And this will create the very conditions that would ensure that the cleavages exposed by Katrina will widen.

The basis for public morality I believe hinges on the notion that there is a motivation beyond profit, and a public with needs that are greater than the sum of the individuals within it. The basis for conventional wisdom I believe hinges on the notion of the conventions themselves are wise and sustainable. It was the absence of those axioms in the workings of the current administration that made New Orleans vulnerable both before and after Katrina.

So, for those who take the blue pill, the American dream is very powerful and still intact. They can wake up and believe whatever they want to believe.

But for those who choose the red pill, however, the rabbit hole is deep. The American reality is different, and Katrina was their wake-up call. Thank you.