No better starting point than St. Augustine's views can be found to obtain a summary—albeit contradictory and evolving, exemplary as well as speculatively deeply appealing—understanding of the early and medieval Church's now exuberant, then more reluctant, but always extensive and intensive, dealings with miracles and marvels and the claims, true and false, that were made in their name by the faithful and imposters alike. More than St. Paul or any other of the Fathers of the Church, Augustine sets out the parameters for reconceiving the theology of miracles and miracle belief, together with their epistemological and moral, spiritual and ecclesial presuppositions and ramifications. In spite of his initial reluctance to give miracles and miracle belief their philosophical no less than theological or pastoral due, Augustine's final statements on the subject arguably remain the most important point of departure and overall frame of reference for all subsequent considerations of their force and signification, event and effect. From St. Thomas Aquinas through the Reformation, and from Blaise Pascal up to Ludwig Wittgenstein, but also in the writings of Alain Badiou no less than those of Jean-Luc Marion, to name just a few examples, the Augustinian legacy of conceptualizing miracles and miracle belief has left a lasting impact on the Western theological and philosophical imagination. It may even offer some of the most suggestive ingredients of any account of the contemporary postsecular world in which religion and media and, I would venture to add, miracles and special effects inform and transform the ways in which current affairs and especially political events present themselves in a variety of generalizing–universalizing, yet also equally intensifying and trivializing—ways.

In so-called everyday life, what is considered extraordinary is given ever newer opportunities to graft itself upon the ordinary, lifting it out of habitual patterns of perception and expectation. Yet in so doing, it exposes the everyday and the ordinary simultaneously—but also, with increasing intensity and at an exponentially growing scale and pace—to possible
sublimity and banality, thus amplifying a risk that was always inherent in the proliferation or, more precisely, dissemination of religious notions and sensibilities, discourses and regimes. Paradoxically, the expansion and phenomenal success of the extraordinary in the ordinary implied a diminished, if remaining, significance of things—indeed, a becoming ordinary of the extraordinary—as well.

This paradoxical logic may surprise us, but it is exactly how the Western canon (and pretty much anything else of significance, elsewhere in the world) was won and, inevitably and immediately, lost again. No one among the Fathers of the Church seemed more acutely aware of this chance and risk—including its political scansion and reverberations—than Augustine. And this is precisely why his writings have remained a standing reference for contemporary political thinking or have regained more and more relevance in the political actuality of everyday as the inner contradictions of modern society and the so-called secular age have become more and more apparent.

While suspicious of the abundant expressions of popular religion such as magic and exorcism, healings and relics, Augustine entertains a complex relationship with the domain of what, traditionally, is conceived as the supernatural. It is this complicated relationship that I wish to bring out in a few broad strokes, mindful of the complexity of the matter and mostly concerned with three or four striking traits of his conception, namely the miracle belief’s publicness and publicity, on the one hand, and the miracle’s presumed acceleration and fastforwarding of natural processes and, hence, special effect on us, on the other. These are two motifs and motivations that, to my knowledge, have not yet found the attention they deserve.

Moreover, Augustine’s argument also relies, thirdly, on a conception of multitude and catholicity—indeed, universality or globality—that is not without implications for the philosophical and theologico-political work that his writings continue to inspire and that, anachronistically speaking, they seem to have anticipated all along, not least in their nuanced dealing with and theorization of miracles, their strategic and pragmatic use and momentum, their political but also more generally persuasive and perlocutionary aspect.

A final, fourth, motif, not explicitly mentioned but deployed throughout his later thought on miracles, martyrs and healings, combines, as Peter Brown has suggested in his study of the lives of the saints, a figure of