Behold now, an evil spirit from God troubleth thee. Let our lord now command thy servants, which are before thee, to seek out a man, who is a cunning player on an harp: and it shall come to pass, when the evil spirit from God is upon thee, that he shall play with his hand, and thou shalt be well.

(1 Sam. 16:15–16)

Habitual engagement in liturgical productions leads often to its actors feeling there is something unmysterious about the ritual transaction as a whole. A day filled with offices takes on a life of its own. The choir monks barely reflect as they file in for compline; the choirboys struggling into their surplices after rehearsal for vespers, think perhaps of football after, but of little else; and the servers light the candles again, as part of a holy routine in the evening, with flickering worries about unfinished homework. There is something uneventful about servicing such holy events.

It is easy for these actors to overlook the mystery they hallow by their dedicated actions. The celebration of a mystery, however, is a central facet of the rites they enact. As Case! notes, ‘the mystery of worship, therefore, is a means whereby the Christian lives the mystery of Christ’. The mysterious aspects of the social wrappings of rite serve another purpose, of drawing attention to that which might seem to be unmysterious and easily misunderstood through the routine handling of this theological core. Reflecting a point made earlier, Case! claims ‘the mystery was formed for man; it is to bring about in him an inward change’. Any mysterious qualities attached to the social form of rite, and the image it cultivates, serve to service the interior life of the actor and to transform it into a deeper spiritual basis.

The re-play of rite gives access to elements of mystery that can redeem the contradictions that might otherwise divide and distort its capacity to bear credible meanings about matters which of their nature are incredible. Hans-Georg Gadamer makes a helpful point about the symbolic in art that can be applied to an understanding of liturgical
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He suggests that symbols involve an 'intricate interplay of showing and concealing'. This teasing antinomial quality can develop a sense of self-recognition, an enhancement of the self before what is presented through these symbolic means of expression. By participating in such a simple but complex ritual task the actor realises an image in the form, and in what he produces can catch an intimation of the Divine. This is where the social form married to a theological content creates an icon. Harnessed to its holiest of purpose, the social becomes a crucible to contain what drops down so unexpectedly from above. This relates to Gadamer's notion of mimesis, when he suggests we are not dealing with a matter of imitation, but with a capacity to represent 'in such a way that it is actually present in sensuous abundance'. The capability of transforming the mundane into the service of the mysterious is a peculiar gift of religious rituals, a point that puzzled Péguy, who wrote in a letter:

Sunday afternoon I entered the church of... without noticing that I was doing so. They were saying vespers. What an amazing thing it is, when one comes to think of it; these three or four urchins of the Ile de France, who meet every Sunday, dressed up as choir boys, to say the psalms of your King David... 

This capacity of liturgical actors to engage and to be transformed in a ritual that addresses a sacred mystery is at odds with worldly wisdom. The vast majority of the population in a secularised society do not go to Church, hence the perplexing nature of those foolish enough to go, to act a holy part. In the action of rite and its easeful re-presentation is a 'scandal of particularity', a stumbling block to belief. The scandal lies in the folly of the social act, and the belief it proclaims, that it can attract the attention of God and can fulfil incarnational promises. More usually, the phrase refers to the incarnation of Christ as God in a particular era, a specific event that is as mysterious as it is scandalous in the demand it makes on the intellect. In our context, the phrase expresses a continuity with the incarnation realised in liturgical performance. The capacity of rite to re-play endlessly represents a scandalous assumption, that God comes in a particular time and place, in a liturgical instance. The style of enactment of the liturgical actors conveys this sense of walking before a holy mystery, whose mysteriousness attaches to them as they strive to find the holy in a public arena.

This tacit mysterious basis to rite operates in an ambiguous fashion. It might justify the suspicion that it is about nothing in particular, and if so, this could be deemed the ultimate scandal about liturgy. But on