

Conversion and method acting

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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In case you're not up on your celebrity news, Shia LaBeouf [recently told *Interview*](#) magazine that he "became a Christian man" on the set of *Fury*, in which he plays an evangelical soldier. Yay, another high-profile believer!

Well, maybe. Megan Basham [points out](#) that it's not entirely clear whether LaBeouf is talking about a religious conversion experience or a Stanislavskian immersion experience:

LaBeouf is a well-known method actor—a technique where the performer tries to simulate the psychological motives, behavior, mannerisms, and thought patterns of a character so deeply that he essentially becomes that character... Looked at in the light of his working process, LaBeouf's subsequent statements in the interview that Pitt and *Fury* director David Ayer helped him navigate the giving up of control that is essential to becoming a disciple of Christ while at the same time maintaining control as an actor makes more sense.... I certainly hope I am wrong in my reading of LaBeouf's comments.... Right now, no one but God knows whether Shia LaBeouf meant to profess a genuine, saving faith that will stand the test of time and the tremendous pressure of the industry he works in.

It's an interesting question and a careful reading of LaBeouf's remarks. Yet I'm frustrated by Basham's dualism here: either LaBeouf became a Christian (good), or he just had an intense experience of learning how to act like one (bad, or at least much less good).

It seems to me that method acting is in fact a decent metaphor for the way conversion often happens. It doesn't always start with a decision and a profession, with "mean[ing] to profess a genuine, saving faith that will stand the test of time." Sometimes it starts with essentially learning how to act like a Christian, to say and do the the things Christian say and do. This is one reason (not the only one!)

liturgical hospitality is so important. Sometimes the work of personal conversion happens over time through practice and belonging.

But the world of evangelical decision theology isn't necessarily full of avid [Diana Butler Bass readers](#). That's a shame. People have been encountering Christianity through a variety of paths, short and long and in various directions, for many many years. If a person immerses himself in the faith's practice for whatever reason and then reports a meaningful experience, we should encourage him on his journey, not say we hope he meant something else.