

As polls show doubt, Obama underscores Christian identity

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [January 11, 2011](#) issue

When President Obama lit the National Christmas Tree behind the White House in the 2009 ceremony, he spoke of a "child born far from home" and said "while this story may be a Christian one, its lesson is universal."

This last December, Obama referred to that same "child born far from home" but added a more personal twist: "It's a story that's dear to Michelle and me as Christians." Three days later, at a Christmas benefit concert, the president again talked about how the story of Christmas "guides my Christian faith."

What changed? For one, three separate polls in the past year have found that one in four Americans think the president is a Muslim, 43 percent don't know what faith he follows, and four in ten Protestant pastors don't consider Obama a Christian.

Stephen Mansfield, author of *The Faith of Barack Obama*, said the polls "had to be a wake-up call to the White House."

Though Obama has spoken of his faith numerous times, saying he prays daily and talking at Easter about how "as Christians, we believe that redemption can be delivered by faith in Jesus Christ," his most recent words about his faith are even more open, more personal.

"I think he's just bringing more of himself to the game, so to speak," said Mansfield. "It's not as though he's changed religions or something. He's just being open about it."

The White House, which declined to comment on the president's recent choice of words, has called him a man of "strong Christian faith" in the past. Nonetheless, White House observers noticed a marked change in tone.

"The president understands that he needs to continually tell his own personal spiritual story," said Shaun Casey, professor of Christian ethics at Washington's Wesley Theological Seminary, who served as an Obama campaign adviser. "He did that masterfully in the campaign, and I think you're seeing a return to that voice."

Timothy Sherratt, professor of political science at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts, said lingering questions about Obama's faith, as reflected in the polls, probably played a role in his latest phraseology.

"Some of that, one would think, has to be in the back of his mind," said Sherratt, who taught a class this semester in political communication at the evangelical college. "Where there's ambiguity, it's always tempting to bring more clarity." —RNS