The Welsh philosopher D. Z. Phillips has made a substantial contribution to the academic study of religion in the second half of this century. Standing against the stream of modern philosophy of religion, Phillips has urged a rethinking of the categories that have dominated academic discourse since the time of David Hume. Religious belief and ritual, seen by many as mistakes based on poorly grounded theories, are argued by Phillips to be genuine expressions of human values. Although Phillips never claims to champion religion, he clearly wishes to rescue it from the misunderstandings of his contemporaries. He attempts to do so by arguing on purely philosophical grounds for the legitimacy of religious expression.

Phillips, although his philosophy of religion is in general well argued and cohesive, runs aground when he attempts to dismiss supposedly superstitious forms of religious activity as confusions. By arguing that "we" know superstition to be based on a false notion of cause and effect, Phillips introduces a paradigm of rationality with which to judge religion, a practice that he argues repeatedly is out of place in philosophy. The problem arises because he mixes theology and philosophy, which, in his own view, ought to be clearly differentiated. It is argued not that Phillips’s philosophical and theological claims are mistaken, but rather that Phillips has not been (and needs to be) clear about which kind of discourse he is engaging in.

Section I will present a characterization of the basic tenets of Phillips’s philosophy, paying special attention to the confusions that Phillips believes dominate much contemporary religious
study. Section II will suggest some problems that arise from Phillips's treatment of religion. Section III, a rhetorical analysis of Phillips's audiences, will both reveal the effect that various audiences have on his argument and suggest a reason for the tensions in Phillips's philosophy.

I

Phillips's career has spanned four decades and included multitudinous books and articles. Over that time, Phillips's philosophy has remained consistent. We see no turnabouts comparable to Wittgenstein's criticisms in the mature Philosophical Investigations of his early manifesto, The Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. Thus, a summation of Phillips's main tenets is a manageable task; the opinions expressed in The Concept of Prayer, his first book, fit neatly alongside those of his recent monographs.

Philosophy and Theology

Phillips's premise is that philosophy should describe and not explain. Its purpose is to account for the way that people use language. At the beginning of The Concept of Prayer, Phillips quotes Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous credo that philosophy "leaves everything as it is." The philosopher looks at what people do and say and does not presume to prescribe certain ways of acting and speaking. The task of philosophy is conceptual elucidation or the analysis of, as Wittgenstein put it, "depth grammar." As such philosophy is "neither for nor against religious beliefs."

Phillips believes that philosophers of religion must look closely at the form of life in which worship occurs. Religion, like all language-games, has its own ethos, its own way of doing things. Often philosophers of religion isolate one aspect of worship, the credo of faith, and focus their whole attention on it. Unlike these philosophers, however, Phillips believes that philosophy should not judge statements of faith as true or false, but seek to understand what such statements mean in the context of religious life. "It is