

Article

# Silent Witness as Civic Theology: Zurab Kiknadze and the Ethics of Public Religion in Post-Soviet Georgia

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## Abstract

In post-Soviet Georgia, the renewed visibility of religion in the public sphere has generated ambivalent effects, fostering both social cohesion and identity-based exclusion. This article focuses on the work *I Am the Way* by Georgian Orthodox thinker Zurab Kiknadze to explore how a non-instrumental, ethics-based conception of public religion can be sociologically conceptualized. Drawing on a qualitative, hermeneutic-narrative method, the analysis identifies two core motifs in Kiknadze's thought—"spiritual journey" and "silent witness"—and interprets them through the lenses of public religion theory (Casanova), lived religion paradigms (McGuire, Ammerman), and post-secular debates (Habermas). The findings indicate that Kiknadze understands faith not as a marker of dogmatic or ethno-political belonging but as a practice contributing to ethical continuity and the reconstruction of social trust. Within this framework, "silent witness" is defined as a form of faith grounded in consistency, humility, and action-oriented conviction; it is proposed as a transferable sociological mechanism that supports trust, reconciliation, and inclusive citizenship in transitional societies. Centering on the Georgian case, this article offers a conceptual contribution to rethinking the public role of religion in post-authoritarian contexts within an ethical framework.

**Keywords:** Eastern Orthodoxy; Georgia; identity; nationalism; public religion; silent witness; social cohesion; sociology of religion

## 1. Introduction

While post-Soviet religiosity has predominantly been examined through the lenses of institutional transformation, identity politics, or national narratives, this article proposes a relational and ethical model of public religion grounded in theological narrative. The social transformation Georgia has undergone in the post-Soviet era has repositioned religion at the heart of public life after decades of enforced secularization policies, radically altering narratives of belonging, continuity, and moral authority. Orthodox Christianity has re-emerged as a significant cultural reference point in this process; however, this revival has been far from a smooth or linear development. More often than not, it has blurred the boundaries between personal faith, collective identity, and political instrumentalization, rendering religion both a unifying social force and a marker of exclusionary boundaries [1,2]. Similar dynamics are observable across other post-Soviet societies, where religion is being reintegrated into public life not only as a spiritual resource but also as a symbolic boundary of national identity [3,4] (pp. 246–253).



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This article aims to offer an original conceptual contribution to the public role of religion in the post-Soviet context by analyzing *I Am the Way* (*Me var gza*, 2005), a seminal work by Zurab Kiknadze, one of Georgia's leading theologians and intellectuals. The central argument is that Kiknadze's motifs of the "spiritual journey" and "silent witness" articulate a non-instrumental form of public religion that can support trust, reconciliation, and inclusive belonging in transitional societies characterized by political uncertainty and fragmented identities. This concept challenges dominant approaches that reduce religion to a mere marker of identity or a political tool, thereby addressing a significant gap in the literature.

Drawing from contemporary debates in the sociology of religion, the article establishes a dialogue between local Orthodox theology and three analytical frameworks:

- Public religion theory [5,6], which examines how faith functions beyond institutional boundaries in modern societies.
- Lived religion and everyday religiosity [7,8], which highlight faith as a bodily and practical experience that shapes social ties and ethical action.
- Post-secularism and the renegotiation of boundaries [6,9,10], which analyze how societies restructure the public role of religion after ideological rupture.

This study makes three key contributions to comparative sociology of religion: First, it introduces the concept of "silent witness" as a transferable sociological mechanism for understanding how Orthodox theology—beyond ethno-nationalist frameworks—can foster civic trust and cross-group solidarity. Second, it develops a transparent hermeneutic-narrative method for deriving sociological concepts from theological texts, thereby offering a conceptual complement to empirical studies on religion and social cohesion. In this context, Kiknadze's theological writings are treated not as empirical data but as culturally meaningful narratives that illuminate ethical orientations, collective memory, and public trust relations in post-Soviet Georgia. The study rests on the assumption that theological discourse, particularly in times of historical transition, functions not only as a declaration of faith but also as a generative source of social meaning. Accordingly, the adopted methodology synthesizes narrative analysis and cultural sociology to interpret the texts within an interpretive framework.

Third, by situating the Georgian case within broader post-Soviet patterns, the study offers a conceptual vocabulary that may guide global research on the public role of religion. The following sections apply a hermeneutic-narrative coding framework (outlined in Section 2.3) to analyze Kiknadze's theological motifs and connect them to sociological theories of public and lived religion.

In conclusion, by bridging local Orthodox theology with contemporary sociological theory, this article enriches existing theoretical debates on how religion can contribute to rebuilding trust, negotiating social boundaries, and fostering integration in post-authoritarian contexts. It ultimately proposes a new concept for the global sociology of religion.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, hermeneutic-narrative approach to examine how notions of faith, identity, and social cohesion are conceptualized in Zurab Kiknadze's *I Am the Way*. The selected text is among the most influential works shaping both the theological and sociocultural influence of Orthodox thought in Georgia, offering a unique conceptual resource for understanding the return of religion to the public sphere in the post-Soviet period.

References to Paul Tillich [11] and Wilhelm Dilthey [12] are included not to shift the theoretical orientation of the study, but to deepen its hermeneutic and interpretive dimension. Tillich's understanding of faith as ultimate concern and Dilthey's emphasis

on *Verstehen* (interpretive understanding) enrich the textual analysis by highlighting the existential and phenomenological aspects of Kiknadze's theology. The research is grounded in the tradition of interpretive sociology [8,12]. This approach makes it possible to read religious texts not solely as doctrinal statements but also as cultural narratives that guide processes of social meaning-making. Drawing on current debates in conceptual sociology [6,9], the study explores how theological motifs can be re-conceptualized in dialogue with sociological theory.

**Data and Analytical Process:** The analysis encompasses the full text of Kiknadze's work, with particular focus on recurring thematic appearances of the concepts of "spiritual journey" and "silent witness". The text was examined through open coding (identifying key concepts), followed by axial coding, which related these concepts to axes of faith, identity, and social cohesion. Throughout the coding process, the contextual uses of concepts were interpreted comparatively with reference to religious and sociological theories. The final conceptual framework was developed as the outcome of this hermeneutic process.

The researcher's position has been explicitly acknowledged, considering the potential subjectivity of the interpretive approach: The study does not assess Kiknadze's ideas in terms of theological accuracy but rather treats them as socio-cultural narratives contributing to public meaning-making. Accordingly, the analysis is framed as a process of interpretation focused on sociological conceptualization rather than normative validation.

### 2.1. Corpus and Selection Criteria

The study's primary corpus consists of *I Am the Way*, a volume comprising eighteen essays written between the 1990s and 2020, some of which were transcribed from public lectures. These essays focus on Christian faith, cultural identity, and ethical responsibility.

Three main reasons justify the selection of this text:

(i) Academic and social impact: The work is one of the most frequently cited contemporary Georgian theological texts in academic debates and intra-church discourse on religion, national identity, and social cohesion in the post-Soviet era. It thus offers a distinctive conceptual basis for examining the role of local theology in the production of social meaning.

(ii) Thematic richness: The text explicitly addresses key topics in the sociology of religion—such as national Christianity, "the way", "silent witness", meaning-making, and ethical responsibility—making it suitable for interdisciplinary analysis.

(iii) Conceptual potential: Kiknadze's approach, which synthesizes philological, theological, and cultural analysis, offers new, transferable conceptual tools for theorizing the public role of religion in post-authoritarian societies.

This study does not claim to be an empirical investigation with statistical generalizability; rather, it aims to develop a conceptual and theory-building perspective. Accordingly, the analysis produces a sociological framework for mechanisms such as "silent witness" through a hermeneutic-narrative interpretation of theological texts, thereby providing a theoretical foundation for future empirical research and comparative inquiry in other post-authoritarian settings.

### 2.2. Coding Procedure and Analytical Steps

In this study, the theological essays are approached not solely as normative-doctrinal expressions but also as socio-cultural narratives through which norms, identities, and moral horizons circulate. In line with the interpretive sociology framework, the primary objective is to reveal how religious ideas may be transferred from discourse into social practices—via mechanisms such as intra-community education, secular catechesis, public discourse, or ethical action.

The coding process focused on both intra-textual semantic structures (recurring motifs, key concepts, metaphorical language) and intertextual connections with public debates in post-Soviet Georgia.

The analysis followed a three-stage hermeneutic-narrative procedure:

(1) Open coding: Each essay underwent repeated cycles of close reading. Recurring motifs (e.g., journey, salvation, silent witness, national Christianity) were systematically recorded.

*Example:*

“გზა ყოველთვის ნიშნავს მოძებნას, სინანულს...” (“The way always implies a search, repentance. . .”) [13] (pp. 11–12) → provisional code: existential journey.

(2) Axial coding: The codes from the first stage were clustered into relational groupings along the axes of personal spirituality, public religion, identity politics, and social ethics. At this stage, not only transformative narratives of faith but also negative depictions of superficial or ritualistic forms of belief—particularly those resisting the “silent witness” principle—were coded under distinct categories.

(3) Theory-based interpretation: The resulting conceptual groupings were interpreted through three sociological frameworks:

- Public religion theory [5,14],
- Lived religion [7,8],
- Post-secularism and boundary renegotiation [6,10].

The qualitative analysis followed a three-stage coding process inspired by grounded theory methodology. During open coding, key expressions and concepts were extracted directly from Kiknadze’s texts without predetermined categories. The axial coding stage connected these initial codes to broader theological and sociological clusters such as trust, witness, silence, and community. Finally, selective coding integrated these clusters into a coherent interpretive model aligned with the hermeneutic framework used in this study. This multi-level process ensured transparency and consistency between textual interpretation and theoretical discussion.

This iterative analytical process established a “code-to-theory chain,” tracing the conceptual mechanisms through which Kiknadze’s theological ideas contribute to themes such as civic trust, reconciliation, and inclusive belonging. Each thematic cluster identified through axial and selective coding—such as silence, trust, and witness—was analytically connected to the theoretical triad of public religion, lived religion, and post-secular ethics, ensuring methodological coherence across sections.

### 2.3. Unit of Analysis and Reliability

The unit of analysis consists of thematic passages (a paragraph or set of conceptually related sentences) in which the study’s key conceptual motifs are explicitly articulated. This unit allowed for detailed hermeneutic interpretation while preserving the contextual meanings of the motifs.

Before describing the technical stages of the coding process, it is essential to outline the theoretical logic that informed the interpretation of data. According to Casanova [15], the concept of public religion refers to the reemergence of religion in the public sphere, where religious actors legitimately participate in moral and political debates without claiming institutional dominance. This deprivatization of religion signifies not a return to theocracy, but an expansion of public dialogue in democratic societies.

In his notion of the post-secular public sphere, Habermas [10] further refines this idea by introducing the principle of translation: religious and secular citizens must engage in

communicative reasoning that is accessible to all. Habermas therefore envisions a civic environment where faith-based perspectives are included in rational public deliberation.

These two frameworks together articulate how religion may act as a moral voice in the public sphere—an idea that underlies the interpretive logic of this study. While Casanova and Habermas primarily discuss institutional and political participation, Kiknadze’s thought redefines this engagement in more ethical and spiritual terms.

The qualitative analysis followed a three-stage coding process inspired by grounded theory methodology. During the open coding stage, key expressions and concepts were extracted directly from Kiknadze’s texts without predetermined categories. The axial coding stage then connected these initial codes to broader theological and sociological clusters such as trust, witness, silence, and community. Finally, selective coding integrated these clusters into a coherent interpretive model aligned with the hermeneutic framework adopted in this study. This multi-level process ensured transparency and consistency between textual interpretation and theoretical discussion, allowing the analysis to remain faithful to Kiknadze’s theological vocabulary while situating it within sociological theory.

Reliability and methodological rigor were ensured through the following strategies:

- Coding consistency: Cross-comparisons were conducted across different sections of the text to ensure conceptual coherence in recurring themes.
- Inclusion of negative and ambiguous cases: Not only normative or affirming passages but also examples in which faith appears superficial, where resistance to the “silent witness” principle or identity-based discourses dominate, were included. This allowed for a more critical and clearly bounded conceptual framework.
- Cross-checking with secondary literature: The findings were continuously compared with existing research on post-Soviet Orthodoxy [1,16] to ensure consistency with the historical-sociological context.
- Audit trail: Coding revisions, theoretical memos, and interpretive decisions were systematically documented, enhancing transparency and traceability in the analytical process.

Although conceptual in nature, the study deliberately leaves its findings open for empirical exploration. This framework generates hypotheses that can be tested in future field research—such as interviews, focus groups, or survey-based experimental studies—on how portable mechanisms like silent witness impact trust-building, out-group empathy, and cooperation. The key conceptual motifs identified in the analysis are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Sample Codes Used in the Conceptual Analysis and Their Relation to Sociological Concepts.

Theme	Illustrative Passage [13]	Code	Sociological Concept
Path ( <i>gza</i> )	<p>“გზა ყოველთვის გულისხმობს ძიებას, მონანიებას, სიღრმის ძიებას...” (pp. 12–13)</p> <p>The path always implies searching, repentance, and a quest for spiritual depth. . .</p>	Existential journey, search for depth	Meaning-making, ethical orientation

Table 1. Cont.

Theme	Illustrative Passage [13]	Code	Sociological Concept
Salvation ( <i>soteria</i> )	“მხსნელი გზა იწყება შინაგან გარდატეხით...” (p. 27) Salvation begins with an inner transformation. . .	Personal transformation; intentionality	Moral orientation; social ethics
Silent witness	“მხოლოდ სიჩუმით შეიძლება ჭეშმარიტება დაიცვა...” (pp. 91–94) Only through silence can truth be preserved. . .	Lived faith, humility, quiet ethics	Non-instrumental public religion, trust-building
National Christianity	“როდესაც ეროვნული იდეა დოგმად იქცევა...” (p. 88) When the national idea becomes dogma. . .	Conflation of faith and ethnic belonging	Ritual nationalism, boundary-drawing
Negative example	“ხშირად რწმენა მხოლოდ ტრადიციის გამეორებად იქცევა...” (p. 85) Faith often turns into mere repetition of tradition. . .	Ritualized belief devoid of depth	Limits of silent witness; performative religiosity

Table 2 illustrates how the interpretive procedure connects textual motifs with theoretical categories, bridging hermeneutic interpretation and sociological reasoning. It summarizes the relationship between the hermeneutic coding stages and the corresponding theoretical dimensions.

Table 2. Relationship between Hermeneutic Stages and Theoretical Concepts.

Coding Stage	Example Codes	Related Theoretical Dimension
Open Coding	“Faith,” “Trust,” “Witness”	Lived Religion
Axial Coding	“Community,” “Silence,” “Responsibility”	Public Religion
Selective Coding	“Silent Witness,” “Moral Presence,” “Civic Trust”	Post-Secular Ethics

Each thematic cluster identified through axial coding—such as *silence*, *trust*, and *witness*—is analytically connected to the theoretical triad of *public religion*, *lived religion*, and *post-secularity*, ensuring methodological coherence across sections.

#### 2.4. Limitations

This study is designed as a qualitative, text-based conceptual analysis. The primary data source is Kiknadze’s *I Am the Way*, which was systematically analyzed using open and axial coding and interpreted through a sociological framework. The study does not include data from field research involving human participants; therefore, the interpretation of findings is limited to conceptual inferences based on textual data.

To contextualize the findings, the study draws on recent surveys of religious life in Georgia, academic research on post-Soviet Orthodoxy, and comparative sociological

literature. However, these are used only as secondary sources to support the theoretical construction of the study.

Future research should employ multi-method triangulation to assess how the concepts proposed here are received and reflected in social practice. Interviews, focus groups, congregational ethnography, and experimental surveys could empirically examine the effects of portable mechanisms such as silent witness on the development of trust, cross-group empathy, and social cooperation.

This article claims conceptual generalizability: the mechanisms identified here—especially those pertaining to non-instrumental forms of religiosity—can be tested, refined, and expanded by subsequent empirical and comparative studies in diverse socio-political contexts.

### 3. Zurab Kiknadze’s Intellectual Position and Conceptual Background

Zurab Kiknadze (1937–2022) occupies a unique position in modern Georgian intellectual history, integrating theology, philology, folklore, and the philosophy of culture through an interdisciplinary lens. Trained in Eastern languages and Assyriology, he conducted pioneering research on ancient Near Eastern texts and later gained wide recognition for his reinterpretations of Georgian oral heritage and Christian tradition [17]. His intellectual approach—fusing philology, literary theory, and theology—offers a framework for addressing core issues such as faith, meaning, and collective memory within the context of a society undergoing post-Soviet transformation.

Kiknadze’s theological thinking emerged from the epistemic vacuum created by prolonged Soviet secularization policies, during which public meaning-making was shaped by ideological narratives detached from spiritual foundations. In *I Am the Way*, Kiknadze reinterprets central Christian concepts—*the way*, revelation, salvation, and divine silence—not as static dogmas but as ongoing existential processes. The ellipsis in the book’s title (“I Am the Way. . .”) symbolises an unfinished, collective search for meaning at both the personal and societal levels [13] (pp. 12–13).

For example, Kiknadze writes:

“გზა ყოველთვის გულისხმობს მიებას, მონანიებას, მიტევებას, სულიერი სიღრმის მიებას...”

*“The way implies a movement of repentance, forgiveness, and a continual quest for spiritual depth. . .”* [13] (pp. 12–13)

This passage clearly reflects his effort to de-institutionalize faith and reorient it from collective identity markers toward personal transformation and ethical responsibility. His approach resonates with Berger’s [18] notion of religion as a “sacred canopy” that provides shared meaning in times of uncertainty, as well as with Hervieu-Léger’s [19] conceptualization of religion as a “chain of memory” that re-establishes social bonds in the aftermath of ideological rupture.

Kiknadze’s thought embraces dialogical and epistemic pluralism, positioning religion as a complementary mode of knowing alongside science and culture. Drawing on Dilthey’s distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* (natural sciences) and *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences), He defines theology as an interpretive form of knowledge that structures existential questions and social ethics [13] (pp. 51–54).

As Tillich reminds us, ultimate concern always bridges the personal and the communal—a notion that resonates with Kiknadze’s emphasis on moral presence and relational trust.

He writes: “Even scientific knowledge presupposes trust—faith is not the exclusive domain of religion” [13] (p. 57). He writes:

*“Even scientific knowledge presupposes trust—faith is not the exclusive domain of religion”* (p. 57)

This view aligns with contemporary approaches in the sociology of knowledge that regard belief systems—whether religious or secular—as foundational to social cooperation and shared rationality [14].

From a sociological perspective, Kiknadze’s work addresses two intertwined challenges in post-Soviet Georgia:

1. The reconstruction of epistemic pluralism: Reintroducing meaning-making narratives rooted in spiritual traditions into a public sphere long dominated by secular ideology.
2. Resistance to ritual nationalism: Critiquing the conflation of faith with ethno-nationalist identity. Kiknadze warns that *“when the national idea becomes dogma, this signals a deviation in both soteriology and ecclesiastical structure”*, thereby problematizing the notion of “national Christianity” [13] (p. 88).

As a result of this dual critique, Kiknadze offers an alternative model of public religion based on the concept of “silent witness”, which designates an ethical mode of faith grounded in humility and moral responsibility rather than ritualized or identity-based religiosity [13] (pp. 91–94). This notion, closely linked to the Orthodox tradition of inward witness, does not imply political passivity but an active moral presence within the public sphere. The idea parallels, at a conceptual level, the kenotic logic of Christian theology (Philippians 2:7), yet is framed here as a civic rather than purely mystical posture. In doing so, Kiknadze’s concept anticipates a broader sociological question: how personal spirituality can function as a cultural resource for rebuilding social trust and civic solidarity in post-authoritarian societies [12,14]. This model opens space for sociological inquiry into how personal spirituality can serve as a cultural resource for the reconstruction of civic trust, reconciliation, and the renegotiation of social boundaries [9,14]. In this sense, Kiknadze’s model of civic faith parallels Wanner’s [20] account of *everyday religiosity* in post-Soviet societies, where religious practice becomes a lived negotiation of identity and belonging rather than a matter of formal dogma.

In conclusion, Kiknadze’s intellectual legacy is situated at the intersection of theology and the sociology of religion. It provides a conceptual bridge between local Orthodox thought and global theoretical debates concerning the civic potential of religion in post-authoritarian contexts. His writings represent not only theological reflection but also an analytical framework for understanding religion as a vehicle for social integration, thus offering a valuable model for comparative sociological research.

#### **4. Between Christian Faith and Cultural Orientation: Interpreting the Concepts of “Way,” “Salvation,” and “Identity”**

One of the core semantic focal points in Zurab Kiknadze’s *I Am the Way* is the verse from the Gospel of John, *“I am the way, the truth, and the life”* (John 14:6). By adding an ellipsis to this declaration in the title, Kiknadze removes its dogmatic finality and reinterprets it as an open-ended process of searching. In doing so, he shifts the emphasis from a static truth claim to religion as an ongoing pursuit of meaning, ethical responsibility, and social engagement [13] (pp. 12–13).

##### *4.1. The Way as an Existential and Civic Orientation*

As Kiknadze notes, the concept of “the way” entails a continuous movement of inner transformation grounded in repentance and the search for spiritual depth [13] (pp. 12–13). This interpretation parallels Ricoeur’s conception of sacred narratives as symbolic structures that shape ethical orientation [16] (pp. 42–45). Sociologically, the motif of the “way” functions as a mechanism of meaning-making that links personal trans-

formation with the reconstruction of social bonds in a fragile post-authoritarian public sphere [18,21]. In transitional societies where ideological collapse has weakened collective norms, this motif signals not only a quest for individual salvation but also a moral framework for re-establishing civic trust and relational responsibility.

This approach underlines the importance of treating theological concepts as dynamic orientations rather than static dogmas when examining their social effects. Kiknadze's reading of the "way" offers a model for how religious faith can function as a portable sociological mechanism connecting individual conscience with public ethics.

#### 4.2. *Salvation Beyond Individualism*

Kiknadze reinterprets the concept of *soteria* (salvation) not as a purely eschatological promise but as an internal transformation with social implications. In his view, salvation cannot be separated from ethical responsibility toward others:

“მსხნელი გზა იწყება შინაგან გარდატეხით და გრძელდება ურთიერთობაში სხვასთან.”

*“The path of salvation begins with inner transformation and continues through relationships with others.”* [13] (p. 27)

This view aligns with [22] (pp. 12–15) concept of “ultimate concern” and [21] (pp. 79–80) emphasis on the individual before God. Nevertheless, Kiknadze goes further by embedding salvation within shared moral horizons that guide public life. Salvation thus becomes a sociological bridge that links personal spirituality to collective ethics and civic cooperation [8].

#### 4.3. *A Critique of National Christianity*

Kiknadze cautions against conflating faith with ethno-national identity, a phenomenon he refers to as “national Christianity”:

“როდესაც ეროვნული იდეა დოგმად იქცევა, ეს სოტერიოლოგიურ და საეკლესიო გადახრას ნიშნავს.”

*“When the national idea becomes dogma, this indicates a deviation in both soteriology and ecclesiastical structure.”* [13] (p. 88)

This critique points to the instrumentalization of religion, particularly the function of Orthodoxy as a “civilization code” in post-Soviet societies [9,23]. Drawing on the universalist ethos of Galatians 3:28 (“There is neither Jew nor Greek. . .”), Kiknadze envisions a form of religiosity capable of transcending ethnic divisions and enabling inclusive belonging.

#### 4.4. *Sociological Implications*

These three motifs—*way*, *salvation*, and *national Christianity*—highlight the tension between ritualized identity and existentially lived faith. Kiknadze's perspective aligns with the “lived religion” paradigm, which emphasizes faith as embodied practice and ethical orientation rather than institutional conformity [8]. In sociological terms:

- The way: Provides orientation frameworks under conditions of uncertainty and mediates the reconstruction of meaning after ideological rupture.
- Salvation: Links personal transformation with social ethics, suggesting mechanisms for restoring trust and reconciliation.
- Critique of national Christianity: Challenges the boundary-drawing function of religion and opens space for cross-group solidarity in pluralist societies.

This reinterpretation positions Orthodox theology as a cultural resource for renegotiating public religion in transitional periods. It connects local spiritual traditions with global debates about the civic role of religion.

## 5. Between Religion and Science: An Attempt at Epistemological Dialogue

One of the most striking features of Zurab Kiknadze's *I Am the Way* is his dialogical and complementary approach to the relationship between religion and science. Kiknadze rejects the commonly assumed model of inherent conflict or rivalry between these domains. Instead, he frames them as distinct yet interrelated modes of knowledge production—irreducible to one another but capable of mutual interaction. From this perspective, he distances himself equally from rigid religious dogmatism and positivist scientific paradigms, proposing a pluralistic epistemology that allows for the coexistence of diverse forms of rationality within society.

Kiknadze's analysis builds on Wilhelm Dilthey's classical distinction between explanatory natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and interpretive human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) [15]. While natural sciences rely on causal explanation of phenomena, the human sciences operate in the realm of meaning, understanding, and interpretation. In this framework, Kiknadze positions religion as a human science; in his view, religion does not compete with empirical explanation but instead offers meaning-making frameworks that guide both individual and collective life [5,13] (pp. 51–54). This approach aligns with traditions in the sociology of knowledge that emphasize religion as a foundational source in shaping social norms, shared identities, and ethical frameworks.

Religious faith, therefore, should not be seen as an alternative or opponent to scientific explanation. Rather, faith must be understood as a fundamental cognitive and emotional inclination toward interpreting one's relationship with the universe and with existence itself. Kiknadze even argues that scientific inquiry relies on a form of "faith": trust in methods, openness to assumptions, acceptance of uncertainty, and the courage to transcend established premises. "Faith is not the exclusive domain of religion," he writes, stressing that every mode of knowledge rests on a relational structure of trust [13] (p. 57). This view challenges the assumption that rationality can be wholly divorced from belief systems, thereby narrowing the perceived divide between scientific and spiritual modes of inquiry.

Kiknadze also observes that many scientific disciplines—astronomy, medicine, botany, anatomy—historically developed within or in cooperation with ecclesiastical institutions. In this context, religion has not only coexisted with science but also served as a formative ground for reasoning in early Byzantine and Georgian intellectual traditions. As Rapp and Crego note, the Georgian Orthodox Church historically emerged as part of an interconnected network of Eastern Christianities whose political and theological center of gravity lay within the Byzantine Empire, while maintaining its own national and linguistic distinctiveness [24] (p. xiv).

Kiknadze's central contribution lies in abandoning a reductionist "religion-versus-science" binary and asserting the possibility of epistemic pluralism—a society in which different modes of meaning-making can coexist. While science seeks to explain *how* phenomena occur, religion addresses the questions of *why* and *to what end*, concerning existence, morality, and collective orientation. These distinctions are not symptoms of conflict but reflect complementary functions that help societies navigate uncertainty and construct shared frameworks of meaning [8,14].

From a sociology of knowledge perspective, this dialogical stance suggests that religious and scientific rationalities address different problem areas within social life in a mutually reinforcing manner: science clarifies mechanisms, while theology frames purpose and direction. In transitional societies, this complementarity can contribute to the proliferation of publicly legitimate rationales in fields such as education, healthcare, and social services, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration.

In this regard, *I Am the Way* should be read not only as a theological text but also as a contribution to the sociology of knowledge and the philosophy of epistemology. Kiknadze's writings exemplify a post-secular intellectual trajectory that invites a rethinking of the relationship between religious belief, the limits of rationality, and science as intertwined dimensions of social life. His perspective shows that dialogue between belief systems and modern scientific reasoning can enrich public discourse in post-Soviet societies that are seeking moral orientation and legitimacy. This multidimensional approach reveals that debates on faith and rationality are not abstract philosophical concerns but are intimately linked to the construction of collective identities, political cultures, and moral frameworks in contemporary Georgia.

## 6. National Christianity and Modern Identity: Kiknadze's Critique and Political Theology in Orthodox Culture

One of the central motifs in Zurab Kiknadze's *I Am the Way* is his critique of *national Christianity*, a term used to describe the fusion of religious affiliation with ethno-national identity. Kiknadze's criticism illustrates how, in post-Soviet Georgia, Orthodox Christianity has often been transformed into a political boundary-making tool that shapes perceptions of citizenship and social prestige [1,16].

Kiknadze underscores that conflating Christianity with national ideology distorts both theology and public ethics:

“როდესაც ეროვნული იდეა დოგმად იქცევა, სოტერიოლოგიური მიზანი იკარგება და რწმენა ხდება პოლიტიკური იდენტობის ნიშანი.”

“When the national idea becomes dogma, the soteriological aim is lost, and faith turns into a marker of political identity.” [13] (p. 88)

This dynamic aligns with broader sociological concerns about the role of religion in nation-building and the processes of boundary-drawing between religion and ethnic identity [6,10]. In post-Soviet Georgia, Orthodoxy often functions less as a sign of genuine belief than as a civilizational code for “authentic Georgian-ness”; participation in church rituals is presented as a marker of national belonging [24].

Kiknadze critiques what he calls “ritual nationalism”—the reduction of faith to loud demonstrations of loyalty to the nation and ecclesiastical hierarchy. He warns:

“რწმენა, რომელიც მხოლოდ ტრადიციის გამეორებად იქცევა, ვერ იცავს ჭეშმარიტებას და მხოლოდ საზღვრებს ავლებს სხვებთან.”

“Faith that becomes merely the repetition of tradition cannot preserve truth and only erects boundaries between people.” [13] (p. 85)

This insight resonates with [14] theory that state-supported public religion often serves to legitimize political order rather than foster ethical transformation. Such performance-based religiosity reinforces in-group/out-group divisions, exacerbating social fragmentation rather than building trust or solidarity.

As discussed earlier, Kiknadze's concept of *silent witness* offers an alternative model of public religion, emphasizing humility and ethical responsibility rather than identity signaling or ideological declaration. This model of public religion:

- Reduces symbolic boundaries by shifting the focus from ethnic affiliation to shared moral responsibility.
- Builds civic trust by measuring the authenticity of faith, not through ritual nationalism but through actions.
- Opens space for dialogue, making religious practice a foundation for reconciliation and inclusive belonging.

This approach aligns with the *lived religion* paradigm [8] and with theories that explore religion's function as a civil resource [5,9], suggesting that faith can mediate the renegotiation of boundaries in polarized societies.

The instrumentalization of religion in nation-building is not unique to Georgia. Similar dynamics can be observed in other contexts:

- Russia: Orthodoxy functions as a civilizational identity marker closely tied to state legitimacy [23].
- Ukraine: Competing Orthodox jurisdictions shape national and political authority [25].
- Armenia: The Apostolic Church serves as an ethnic identity symbol amid pluralistic debates [26].

Within this broader framework, Kiknadze's concept of *silent witness* offers a portable sociological category for post-Soviet contexts. It proposes a normative model of public religion that promotes trust and reconciliation, repositioning religion as a vehicle not for exclusion or political dominance but for civic healing.

By contrasting *national Christianity* with *silent witness*, Kiknadze raises critical questions about how religion becomes embedded in identity politics while also revealing its potential as a resource that transcends ethnic boundaries. His perspective contributes to comparative studies of post-authoritarian transitions and demonstrates the potential of local theology to reimagine public religion in more inclusive, ethically grounded, and trust-generating ways, enriching theoretical discourse beyond the Georgian case.

## 7. The Personal Face of Faith: Spiritual Journey and Silent Witness

Zurab Kiknadze's *I Am the Way* reveals three layers of tension within contemporary Georgian Orthodoxy: institutionalized theology, faith nationalized through ethno-political discourses, and the individual's inner experience of spirituality. In this context, Kiknadze puts forward a model of religiosity grounded in existential transformation and public ethical responsibility—one that transcends ritual nationalism and identity-based religious frameworks. Two central motifs in the text—*spiritual journey* and *silent witness*—demonstrate how religious experience can function not only through dogmatic or identity-based affiliations but also through personal transformation and social healing.

Kiknadze portrays human life as a “pilgrimage” shaped by uncertainty, repentance, and a continuous search for meaning:

“გზა ნიშნავს მოძებნას, სინანულს, ღმერთისკენ მომართვას, და ამავე დროს სხვასთან მორალურ პასუხისმგებლობას.”

*“The path signifies seeking, repentance, turning toward God, and at the same time, moral responsibility toward others.”* [13] (pp. 12–13)

This understanding resonates with transformational concepts in Eastern Christian mysticism such as *katharsis* and *palingenesis*, yet Kiknadze situates it within the unique socio-historical context of post-Soviet Georgia. The moral disorientation and fragile trust relations that emerged following ideological collapse reframe the metaphor of “journey” not merely as an individual experience but as a normative framework for rebuilding societal trust [19] (pp. 122–125); [8] (pp. 13–16). In this light, faith is conceptualized not only as a soteriological process but also as an ethical practice aimed at restoring social bonds.

As discussed earlier, Kiknadze's concept of *silent witness* represents an ethical stance of humility and moral consistency rather than performative religiosity. In this section, it is revisited in relation to the broader dynamics of post-Soviet social reconstruction and lived religion [7,8].

In transitional societies like Georgia, where divided identities persist, *silent witness* assumes three functional dimensions:

(i) Trust-Building: Faith grounded in ethical consistency, rather than ritualized identity symbols, lays the foundation for rebuilding interpersonal and institutional trust [27] (pp. 136–138); [9] (pp. 48–50).

(ii) Reconciliation: By prioritizing forgiveness and humility, silent witness enables the repair of relationships damaged by conflict and ideological divisions.

(iii) Collaborative Ethics: Faith rooted in action rather than discourse fosters inclusive belonging and mutual care, transcending symbolic boundaries and opening space for civic dialogue.

Nonetheless, two theoretical tensions must be acknowledged in Kiknadze’s model of internalized faith:

- The Risk of Quietism: In contexts of injustice and structural oppression, silence may be perceived as passivity and could undermine struggles for public justice [28] (pp. 230–232).
- Tension with Orthodox Communalism: The Orthodox tradition emphasizes ecclesial solidarity and collective worship; an overly individualized model of faith could clash with this communal ethos [29] (pp. 89–92).

Thus, *silent witness* should not be equated with retreat into the private sphere; rather, it must be understood as a relational ethic of humility, potentially complemented by public speech and advocacy when necessary.

This concept intersects with Habermas’s theory of the post-secular public sphere. Hervieu-Léger [10] (pp. 112–115) emphasizes that for religion to remain relevant in modern public discourse, it must engage in rational forms of argumentation and translation processes. Kiknadze’s notion of *silent witness* offers a model in which religion is not reduced to political propaganda or identity performance but instead contributes to public trust and dialogue through ethical practice. In this sense, “silence” provides the moral coherence that precedes and grounds rational public deliberation.

Likewise, ref. [14] (pp. 211–218) thesis on the public reemergence of religion is complemented by Kiknadze’s approach. Casanova argues that modernity has not resulted in the withdrawal of religion from the public sphere but rather in new forms of ethical and social visibility. *Silent witness* shows how religion can be repositioned not as a tool of political power but as a moral resource for building trust and reconciliation. In doing so, Kiknadze’s concept offers a transferable analytical framework for theorizing religion’s “constructive social power” in post-authoritarian and polarized societies. In this way, faith is reimagined not solely as a soteriological process but as an ethical practice aimed at restoring social ties. The three core dimensions of the “Silent Witness” model—trust, reconciliation, and ethical action—are summarized in Table 3.

To accurately grasp this conceptual framework, it is essential to distinguish between *silent witness* and classical *quietism* (i.e., mystical withdrawal). *Silent witness* does not represent political silence or passive withdrawal but rather a mode of ethical action grounded in consistency. “Ethical silence” entails non-verbal participation in everyday practices that foster justice, humility, and empathy without serving as displays of identity or moral superiority. In contrast, “political silence” may implicitly legitimize structural inequalities and injustices through inaction. Kiknadze’s model of *silent witness* involves a posture of being that may include public speech and advocacy when necessary; it does not begin with silence, but it always finds direction in moral responsibility. This distinction is crucial for framing the model not as passive withdrawal but as a relational, ethically grounded, and active public presence.

**Table 3.** Core Dimensions of the “Silent Witness” Model: Trust, Reconciliation, and Ethical Action.

Sociological Function	Conceptual Description	Role in the Silent Witness Model
Trust	Interpersonal and institutional trust rooted in ethical consistency, not symbolic identity.	Faith becomes a foundation for rebuilding social trust in post-authoritarian societies.
Reconciliation	Acknowledgment of guilt, humility, and forgiveness as relational practices.	Supports healing in fragmented societies through non-performative religious presence.
Ethical Action	Faith embodied in sustained, non-verbal, and consistent moral behavior.	Offers a public religious model focused on action, not rhetoric or identity politics.

## 8. Discussion

This study has examined Zurab Kiknadze’s *I Am the Way* as an intellectual resource for conceptualizing the role of religion in processes of meaning-making and social cohesion in post-Soviet Georgia. The Discussion Section builds directly upon the analytical clusters identified during the axial coding stage—such as faith, silence, and trust—linking them to the theoretical triad of public religion, lived religion, and post-secularity developed in the findings section.

The findings reveal a dual critique in Kiknadze’s thought: on the one hand, he interrogates the instrumentalization of religion as a marker of national identity; on the other, he addresses the secular epistemic void that emerged following the collapse of Soviet ideology. In place of these dual structures, Kiknadze proposes two interconnected motifs—*spiritual journey* and *silent witness*—that reconceptualize faith as an existential orientation and ethical practice, offering sociological insight into how religion may foster civic trust and inclusive belonging in transitional societies.

Similar trajectories of post-Soviet religious transformation can be observed in other Orthodox contexts. In Russia, for example, the reemergence of the Orthodox Church after decades of repression has reignited debates over moral authority and the national role of religion [23]. In Ukraine, lived religion has taken more plural and civic-oriented forms, whereas in Armenia, Orthodoxy’s reengagement with social trust remains mediated by national symbolism [20,29]. These parallels situate Kiknadze’s reflections within a broader Orthodox experience of negotiating faith, ethics, and public life in the post-socialist world.

### 8.1. Relating Theology and the Sociology of Religion

Kiknadze’s ideas intersect meaningfully with core debates in the sociology of religion:

- **Public Religion:** While Casanova [14] emphasizes the resurgence of religion in the public sphere, Kiknadze notes that this process often takes the form of ethno-national boundary-making. His concept of *silent witness* points to a non-instrumental, relational model of public religion that shapes civic life through ethical consistency rather than political dominance.
- **Lived Religion:** In parallel with Jansma [8] and Ammerman [7] conceptualizations, Kiknadze interprets faith as an embodied experience expressed through everyday practices. He emphasizes humility, repentance, and interpersonal responsibility over collective ritualism.

- Post-Secularity: As Habermas [10] and Taylor [28] suggest, post-secular societies require new dialogical frameworks between religious and secular reasoning. Habermas's *translation proviso* holds that religious discourse must be rendered into rationally shareable language for public acceptance. *Silent witness* facilitates this process by offering a practice of faith rooted in action and ethical consistency rather than dogmatic pronouncements, thereby contributing to a strengthened common rationality.

In [14] Casanova links the return of religion to the public sphere with its capacity to reshape political space. Kiknadze's model critically reinterprets this view: *silent witness* suggests that religion need not be a tool of political dominance or identity demarcation in public life, but can instead become a paradigm focused on relational responsibility, trust-building, and reconciliation. Thus, Kiknadze's approach not only complements but also reframes Casanova's theory by offering an alternative model of public religion as an ethical and dialogical practice.

### 8.2. Beyond Georgia: Comparative Reflections

The issues Kiknadze addresses are not unique to Georgia. Similar dynamics are observed across other post-Soviet contexts:

- Russia: Orthodoxy is closely intertwined with state power, reinforcing civilizational boundaries [23].
- Ukraine: Religion is deeply entangled with debates on national identity and geopolitical conflict [25].
- Armenia and the Balkans: Churches function as ethnic boundary markers in post-socialist nation-building processes [26].

In this regard, the concept of *silent witness* offers a transferable sociological framework for exploring how religious traditions can transcend the confines of identity politics and foster trust, reconciliation, and civic-based dialogue. Future empirical studies—through interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, or surveys—could test whether non-instrumental forms of religiosity correlate with high levels of social trust and inclusive civic attitudes.

Kiknadze's concept of *silent witness* both resonates with and challenges the frameworks of Casanova and Habermas. While Casanova's model of *deprivatization* advocates the re-entry of religion into civic life, Kiknadze suggests that moral presence need not depend on political participation. Similarly, whereas Habermas envisions translation between secular and religious reasoning, Kiknadze offers an alternative mode of coexistence grounded in silence, humility, and non-dominant testimony. This represents a distinctly Orthodox interpretation of post-secular ethics, where faith influences public life through ethical example rather than institutional activism.

### 8.3. Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the sociology of religion literature in three key ways:

- Conceptual Innovation: It introduces the concept of silent witness as a sociological mechanism that links personal spirituality with collective ethics, complementing existing theories of public and lived religion.
- Methodological Expansion: It demonstrates that the hermeneutic-narrative analysis of theological texts can yield sociological insights that go beyond quantitative measures of religiosity.
- Post-Secular Perspective: It shows that epistemic pluralism can serve as a model for re-establishing civic meaning in post-authoritarian societies, positioning faith and science within a dialogical rather than conflictual relationship.

#### 8.4. Policy and Practical Relevance

While religion in post-Soviet contexts often contributes to social polarization, Kiknadze's approach brings forward several policy-relevant insights:

- Promoting faith practices rooted in ethics and action rather than identity-based or performative religiosity.
- Supporting civil initiatives that foster trust and reconciliation among diverse religious groups and citizens.
- Integrating religious narratives that emphasize humility and responsibility into public discourse on nation-building, citizenship, and moral education.

At this point, the integration of theological concepts with sociological interpretation provides a cultural resource that complements secular strategies in efforts to rebuild social cohesion. The alignment between hermeneutic themes and their corresponding theoretical frameworks is summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Alignment between Hermeneutic Themes and Theoretical Frameworks.

Hermeneutic Theme	Related Theoretical Concept	Theoretical Framework
Silent Witness	Ethical presence, humility	Orthodox Public Ethics/Political Theology
Trust	Civic responsibility, moral example	Post-secular Ethics (Habermas)
Silence	Non-discursive moral communication	Public Religion (Casanova)

This table summarizes how the central hermeneutic themes identified in the analysis correspond to broader theoretical frameworks, visually clarifying the study's conceptual alignment across theology and sociology.

#### 8.5. Limitations and Future Research

This study offers a conceptual and text-based analysis limited to the views of a single influential theologian in Georgia. Future research should comparatively examine the concept of *silent witness* across Orthodox and non-Orthodox traditions, employ qualitative or mixed-method empirical approaches to test the relationship between non-instrumental religiosity and social trust, and explore the integration of humility- and forgiveness-centered religious narratives into peacebuilding and civic education processes.

To enhance the empirical testability of *silent witness*, it is crucial to develop clear and testable hypotheses that can serve as conceptual entry points for future research. The following example hypotheses provide guiding frameworks for evaluating the model in terms of social trust, empathy, and public engagement:

**H1:** *The practice of silent witness is positively correlated with individuals' levels of relational trust.*

**H2:** *Non-performative, ethics-based forms of religiosity are associated with higher levels of out-group empathy.*

**H3:** *Individuals who adopt a silent witness approach exhibit stronger critical attitudes toward exclusionary expressions of religious identity.*

**H4:** *Communities that embrace silent witness demonstrate higher levels of social inclusion and civic dialogue.*

These hypotheses can be tested through qualitative interviews, congregational ethnographies, or survey-based quantitative analyses in post-authoritarian contexts like Georgia.

In this way, *silent witness* could move beyond a conceptual proposition and become empirically grounded in concrete social outcomes such as trust, reconciliation, and inclusivity.

## 9. Conclusions

This study has examined Zurab Kiknadze's *I Am the Way* as a theoretical resource for conceptualizing the role of religion in meaning-making and the reconstruction of social cohesion in the public life of post-Soviet Georgia. The findings show that Kiknadze develops a twofold critique: on one hand, he interrogates the instrumentalization of religion as a tool for ethno-national identity construction; on the other, he questions the epistemic void left by the collapse of Soviet ideology. In response to this dual problematic, Kiknadze proposes two core motifs—*spiritual journey* and *silent witness*—to reconceptualize faith in terms of existential orientation and ethical responsibility, showing how religion can serve as a transformative resource for trust, reconciliation, and inclusive citizenship in post-authoritarian settings.

These conclusions directly stem from the hermeneutic–narrative coding process outlined in Section 2.3, in which the clusters of faith, silence, and trust were analytically connected to the theoretical triad of lived religion, public religion, and post-secular ethics.

These findings intersect with three major axes of the sociology of religion. First, while engaging with [15] thesis on the return of religion to the public sphere, Kiknadze highlights how this return often manifests as political boundary-drawing and identity-based exclusion. In contrast, *silent witness* offers a non-instrumental alternative model of public religion grounded in ethical consistency, relational responsibility, and trust-building. Kiknadze's ethical model thus extends Casanova's notion of public religion beyond its empirical formulation, advancing a more normative and theological conception of civic morality. Second, in parallel with [7,8] conceptualizations of *lived religion*, Kiknadze portrays religion not as confined to institutional and ritual structures, but as an embodied phenomenon situated within the relational contexts of everyday life. By emphasizing humility and interior faith, Kiknadze reconceptualizes participation in the public sphere not as verbal discourse but as moral presence. Third, as discussed by [6,10] Kiknadze's emphasis on epistemic pluralism suggests that religion can exist not in opposition to science and secular reasoning but in dialogical relation to them—thereby contributing to the reconstruction of shared rationality and meaning after ideological rupture.

This conceptual framework invites broader reflection on the role of religion in fostering social cohesion and peacebuilding in post-socialist contexts beyond Georgia. In Russia, the fusion of Orthodoxy with state power constructs civilizational boundaries [23]; in Ukraine, religion is entangled with national identity struggles and geopolitical conflict [17,25]; in Armenia and the Balkans, churches function as markers of ethnic boundaries [18]. In such settings, *silent witness* offers a means of conceptualizing religion as a social resource that transcends identity polarization through ethical consistency, mutual trust, and dialogical peace.

Moreover, the concept's transferability is not confined to Orthodox contexts. Catholic social teaching offers comparable notions such as *silent service* and *ethics of care*; Protestant traditions emphasize *unassuming piety*; and Islamic thought includes ideas akin to *hikmat al-samt* (the “wisdom of silence”). These parallels suggest that similar forms of *silent witness* exist across religious traditions, reinforcing the idea that the concept offers a portable analytical framework for the global sociology of religion.

The study's contribution stands out on three levels:

(i) The concept of *silent witness* renders visible the connection between personal spirituality and collective ethics, offering a complementary perspective to existing theories of public and lived religion.

(ii) The hermeneutic-narrative analysis of theological texts demonstrates methodological potential for sociology of religion, which often relies on quantitative indicators.

(iii) The emphasis on epistemic pluralism shows how dialogical and pluralist public reasoning can contribute to the reconstruction of meaning in the wake of authoritarian secularism.

Given the conceptual nature of this study and its limitation to one author and one national context, generalizability is constrained. Future research should comparatively explore the concept of *silent witness* across both Orthodox and non-Orthodox traditions, empirically test the relationship between non-instrumental religiosity and social trust using qualitative or mixed methods, and examine how religious narratives centered on humility and forgiveness can be integrated into peacebuilding and civic education efforts.

In conclusion, this article introduces a novel concept to global sociology of religion by conceptualizing a distinctive theological insight from Georgian Orthodoxy and proposing a transferable analytical framework for understanding ethical, relational, and peace-oriented forms of public religion. Moreover, it suggests that religious narratives rooted in ethics can be more effectively integrated into policy and practice aimed at peacebuilding, civic education, and trust-based social initiatives. The model of *silent witness* offers a non-polarizing framework for interfaith dialogue, civic education, and social reconciliation in polarized post-authoritarian societies, and thus holds transformative potential for both policymakers and religious institutions. While the study was initially framed within the conceptual triad of public religion, lived religion, and post-secularity, the findings indicate that Kiknadze's intellectual legacy extends beyond these frameworks. His vision of *silent witness* aligns more closely with the tradition of Orthodox public ethics or political theology, which emphasizes spiritual authenticity, humility, and moral presence in social life. Thus, rather than politicizing faith, Kiknadze articulates an ethical model through which religious consciousness may sustain civic trust in post-Soviet societies. This Orthodox hermeneutic of silence enriches the sociological discussion on religion's role in post-secular societies by offering a model of faith grounded in relational ethics and non-discursive moral communication.

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