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**Title:** Media in shaping knowledge about the secular state

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**Citation style:** Guzek Damian. (2018). Media in shaping knowledge about the secular state. "Political Preferences" (2018, nr 18, s. 23-36), DOI:10.6084/m9.figshare.6025286



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**Media in Shaping Knowledge about the Secular  
State**

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Political Preferences

2018, vol. 18: 23-36.

DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.6025286

journals.us.edu.pl/index.php/PP

Submitted: 29/12/2017

Accepted: 18/02/2018



**Abstract:**

This article undertakes the issue of the sources from which we obtain our knowledge and shape our opinions on the topic of the secular state. Based on a questionnaire survey on a representative group of Poles, I point to the constitutive role of the media in this process. However, I specify that the preferred sources of information are first of all television and then the Internet. Next, I translate the results of the quantitative analysis onto Neuberger's (1999) approach to the Church-state relationship. As a result, I point out that the opinions of the respondents are located in the endorsed Church space. At the same time, I argue that in this type of approach to Church-state relations, respondents more often perceive the pressure of the Catholic Church in relation to state authority than vice versa.

**Key words:**

media, secular state, Church-state relationship, Poland, media reception

***Introduction***

This article deals with media issues as a source of shaping Poles' knowledge about the secular state. The context of the analysis that I refer to proves the importance of the topic. After the political system change from communist to a democracy, Casanova (1994) predicted that in the coming decades, Poland would remain a country in which Catholicism played the role of a public religion. His intuition remains valid in this second decade. Poland is distinguished by a strong relationship between religion and her identity, with a high 64% indicator of religiousness from among the other Catholic countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Pew Research Centre 2017). Constitutive to the public sphere media take into account the perspective of our dominating Catholicism (Guzek 2017). Today, however, we are undergoing secularization that promises a scenario of the privatization of religion (Borowik 2010). This emerging secular space

lacks an analysis of media, religion, and politics that concerns our understanding of the *secular state*. This intuition leads me to question the place of the media in shaping our knowledge and opinions about this concept. Therefore, in this article, I analyze what share the media play in our understanding of the concept of a *secular state*.

The task I undertook turned out to be important for several reasons. First, broad comparative studies from both Western and non-Western countries point to progressing secularization (Künkler, Madeley, & Shankar 2018; Norris & Inglehart 2004). Religion transforms rather than disappears (Davie 2007; Woodhead & Catto 2012). In CEE countries and the former Soviet Union, this tendency is evident in a specific way. The dominant religion is related to nationality. A good citizen is a devotee of a particular religion. For example, in Russia, a citizen is identified with the Orthodox Church, however, this does not show an increase in religious practices (Pew Research Centre 2017).

Second, our current study of religious phenomena necessarily takes into account the perspective of the media. We are talking about the so-called religion and media turn (Engelke 2010). This means that religion articulated by religious and secular actors “cannot be grasped without understanding the media and how it influences society and culture” (Lövheim 2014: 553). The reason is fundamentally due to the fact that it is mainly the media that distribute a number of religious representations in the public sphere. These only represent the public side of religious rituals and sacred events (Dayan & Katz 1994; Guzek, Szostok, & Głuszek-Szafraniec 2015). They also point to the functioning of secular contents in the background of religion in social awareness, which Knott, Poole, and Taira (2013) describe as the *secular sacred*.

Third, we noticed that in current studies (Herbert 2011; 2015), the level of religious visibility in Poland is not connected with threads in the sphere of the secular and sacred and the mentioned *secular sacred* concept. Referring to the issues in this article, I am thinking about the lack of analysis on the representation of the *secular state* in media coverage, as well as the place of the media among the sources of this content in the minds of recipients. In this article, I omit the analysis of the media content, however, I focus on the recipients of the media, and more specifically the sources of their knowledge and opinions about the *secular state*.

### ***Conceptualizing the Secular State***

The concept of a *secular state* is discussed in every geographical region. Such concept translates into a variety of understandings and attribution of separate connotations (neutral, negative, positive). The context in Poland, in which I undertake my analysis, includes some

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ambiguity. On the one hand, in our social awareness, the state of affairs before our system changes took place included a program of atheism inscribed on its banner and our opposition partnering with the Church against the authorities (Hervieu-Legér 2000). On the other hand, our social experiences after the system changes refer to attempts to negotiate the dominant position of the Church in the public sphere (Grzymała-Busse 2015; Kowalczyk 2012).

We find the simplest understanding of the *secular state* in the dual pattern of religious state and the *pure separation* or so-called *religious state à rebours* (Małajny 2013). However, this division proves to be impossible to practically implement. In turn, various other social contexts provide specific mixed types and kinds of separation. Led by the need for a clear division, which is verifiable in social practice, for the purposes of this article, I apply a popular distinction made by Benjamin Neuberger (1999). It contains six types of nations, depending on the nature of the relationship between public authority and institutional religions: *secular-absolutist*, *theocracy*, *separation of Church and state*, *recognized communities*, *established Church* and *endorsed Church*.

The taxonomy presented is spread over a continuum which boundaries are set by two extremes: *a secular-absolutist state* and a *theocracy*. The first type, characteristic of the former Soviet Union and its satellites, assumes an oppressive attitude towards religious practices and the functioning of institutional religions in the public sphere. Its opposite is a *theocracy*, which, as in the case of Saudi Arabia, means the interweaving of religious laws and state legislation. The remaining types are characterized by a gentler approach towards the Church-state relationship. In the case of the *separation of Church and state*, the secular nature of the state and its lack of interest or influence on the life of its Churches are emphasized. Depending on the version, we can talk about two such variants. The milder *open separation* present in the United States allows the presence of religious rituals in the public life, but the state does not favor any religious group. *Hostile separation*, implemented in the case of France's *laïcité*, generally excludes the presence of religious symbols and rituals in the public sphere.

*Recognized communities*, *the established Church*, and *the endorsed Church*, are the three types that assume the public role of religion. *Recognized communities* emerged as a consequence of the 1517 Reformation and related religious divisions in Germany. They were the foundations for the recognition of religious communities that meet certain legal conditions and were granted certain prerogatives in the public sphere. Each of the recognized groups, however, obtains the same rights and obligations. The *established Church*, which in modern history appeared along

with the Act of Supremacy of the English Parliament in 1534, points to a specific Church as official, including a constitutional position (cf. [Bradney 2011](#)).

This type is historically justified, as in the case of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland. The last of the types, the *endorsed Church*, is characterized by a certain complexity. Within this framework, none of the religions present has an established status, since all religions have equal rights and obligations. However, one of the Churches is in a privileged position from the symbolic perspective. This is exactly the situation identified by the following article in the Constitution of Poland:

The relations between the Republic of Poland and the Roman Catholic Church shall be determined by international treaty concluded with the Holy See, and by statute ([The Constitution of the Republic of Poland, 1997. art 25, § 4](#)).

The ambiguity of the Polish context which I mentioned is clearly revealed in the type of *endorsed Church* presented. From an analytical perspective, it will be interesting to check whether this type of a model of Church-state relations functions in the minds of the respondents studied and what their basic sources of knowledge about it are. In my analysis, however, I am not only limited to the conceptualization of the *endorsed Church*. I assume that the data obtained from the respondents on the secular state will be considered in relation to Neuberger's six basic variants.

### ***Methodology***

The nature of this study means that the basic purpose of the article is to establish sources of knowledge and opinions on the idea of a secular state as represented by the Polish population. My goal is first of all to determine the state of three cognitive areas. The first indicates which of the means of communication is the basis for understanding the secular state among the respondents. The second concerns how respondents understand the implementation of the postulate of secularism in their nation in the current social context. Next, I will be concerned with views on the influence of the Catholic Church in Poland, which dominates the state. The last issue also refers to the analogous influence of the state on the Catholic Church.

The main research problem is not directly confirmed in previous quantitative studies ([CBOS 1994](#); [CBOS 2013](#); [CBOS 2015b](#); [CBOS 2015a](#)). When formulating research questions and hypotheses, I could not use previous regularities and trends in literature. I therefore assumed that the study would have an exploratory character. I based this problem on three research

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questions and the corresponding hypotheses presented below. Targeting television and the press present in hypothesis H3, from the available arrangements, I derived the main sources of religious representation from among media recipients (McCloskey 2010).

Q1: Are the media an important source of knowledge on the idea of a secular state?

H1: The media play a fundamental role in providing knowledge about the secular state.

Q2: Which media provide basic knowledge about the idea of a secular state?

H2: Television and printed press play a fundamental role in providing knowledge about the idea of a secular state.

Q3: How do people identify the implementation of the idea of a secular state?

H3: The secular state is understood through the prism of breaking the concordat.

The data which I analyse in this study comes from a survey conducted from April 19 to May 19, 2017 on a sample of 1000 adult Poles (569 women and 431 men). The research was carried out using the Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI) method. They were made by trained and supervised tele-interviewers with the help of the CATI SUPPORT 4.0 computer program. The study sample was selected based on the pre-set gender quota, age and place of residence that reflected the structure of adult Polish residents. Accepted numbers were applied to sex (women: N=569; men: N=431), age (18–24: N=61; 25–34: N=91; 35–44: N=125; 45–54: N=182; 55–64: N=256; ≥ 65: N=285) and place of residence (village: N=356; city: N=644).

The questionnaire was prepared for the needs of a broader study within the project *Media towards the idea of a secular state*. It consisted of 44 single and multiple choice questions that concerned the issue of a secular state, the Church-state relationship, the religiousness of respondents and the sources of obtaining information on the topics discussed. Issues related to the religiosity of Poles were formulated in such a way that they remain consistent with the tools from previous religious studies carried out by the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS), the Institute of Sociology of the University of Warsaw (IS UW) and the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences (ISiF PAN). Due to the subject matter of the text, I have narrowed down the selection of the data presented here.

The questionnaire used two groups of questions. The first referred to opinions about the secular state, the Church-state relationship, the religiousness of respondents and their sources of knowledge about the secular state. The second group concerned the state of knowledge related to the secular state and the practice of Church-state relations. Depending on the type of issue, respondents provided answers based on the selection of specific facts and, based on the Likert

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scale, gave five positive responses: “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” “strongly disagree,” or “hard to say;” and based on their answer from the three-item list, they responded either “yes,” “no” or “difficult to say.”

### **Results**

The table below presents the percentage shares of preferred sources of information about the secular state according to place of residence. Worth noting are the three basic sources of this information, where TV takes first place (63%). This media receives the highest score among residents living in cities of up to 20,000 people (67%) and in rural locations (66%). In the case of the inhabitants of the largest cities, the role of television as the basic source of information on the secular state is slightly lower (56%). The next source of information is the Internet (55%), which clearly dominates among residents of the largest cities (68%) and is least used among rural residents (48%). The third source of acquiring knowledge about the secular state is the press (44%) but it does not differ much from the next source, which is talking with other people (42%). The presented results clearly show that the media are the basic source of information about the secular state. At the same time, there is a discrepancy in the choice of media among the inhabitants of the largest cities and village residents.

**Table 1.** The sources of information on the topic of a secular state according to place of residence

Source of information about the secular state	Place of Residence					Total
	Village	Cities up to 20,000 residents	Cities from 20 to 100 thousand residents	Cities from 100 to 500 thousand residents	Cities over 500,000 residents	
Television	65.7%	66.9%	60.6%	64.0%	56.3%	63.2%
Internet	48.2%	51.6%	54.4%	60.5%	67.6%	54.8%
Press	41.5%	42.1%	43.4%	45.1%	51.4%	44.1%
Talks with other people	38.7%	32.5%	42.4%	46.3%	55.7%	42.3%
Radio	40.6%	43.8%	36.7%	34.5%	44.0%	40.0%
Social Media	32.2%	35.3%	29.7%	31.0%	33.5%	32.3%
Church – sermons and parish announcements	33.9%	25.7%	24.8%	20.7%	20.2%	26.8%
Other	4.4%	3.7%	1.8%	5.0%	7.1%	4.4%
None	2.6%	1.7%	6.8%	2.3%	4.4%	3.4%
Difficult to say	3.2%	.8%	3.7%	2.9%	3.4%	2.9%

*Multi-choice questions, percentages do not add up to 100*

Source: own elaboration.

As we can see from Table 2, obtaining information about a secular state is related to the age of the respondents. There is a huge disproportion among the youngest in their dominant declarations that the sources of their knowledge about the secular state are the Internet (77%) and social media (39.9%). The proportions change in the case of the 35–44 year old group, where the primary source of knowledge on the subject turns out to be television (67%) and then the Internet (59%). In the case of the oldest respondents, the dominating source is still television (67%) and the press (42.2%). The results obtained indicate two regularities. First of all, depending on the age group, television or the Internet shape opinions about the secular state. Second, the discourse of Churches is an insignificant source of knowledge about the secular state (26.8% in total), with a slight increase in the 35–54 year old group (31.8%).

**Table 2.** Sources of information about a secular state according to age

Sources of information about the secular state	Age			
	18–34 year olds	35–54 year olds	over 55 years of age	Total
Television	59.4%	62.1%	67.0%	63.2%
Internet	77.3%	59.1%	34.6%	54.8%
Press	43.5%	46.7%	42.2%	44.1%
Talks with other people	47.4%	44.6%	36.5%	42.3%
Radio	40.1%	46.6%	34.0%	40.0%
Social Media	39.9%	37.2%	22.3%	32.3%
Church – sermons and parish announcements	22.7%	31.8%	25.2%	26.8%
Other	5.2%	2.1%	5.8%	4.4%
None	1.7%	4.8%	3.4%	3.4%
Difficult to say	1.6%	3.5%	3.2%	2.9%

*Multi-choice questions, percentages do not add up to 100*

Source: own elaboration.

An interesting issue is the combination of the main source of information about the secular state presented in Table 3 with the attitudes of respondents towards religious faith. There are two things worth mentioning when analyzing the following table. People who declare themselves to be non-believers primarily acquire information about a secular state from the Internet, and then from the press. Believers, on the other hand, first gain knowledge about the secular state from television and then from the Internet.



**Table 3.** The main source of information about the secular state in relation to religious faith

Main source of information about the secular state	Attitude towards religious faith					
	Decided non-believer	Rather non-believer	Believer	Deeply Religious	No answer	Total
Talks with other people	11.1%	10.0%	5.4%	8.1%	6.1%	6.5%
Press	20.4%	16.7%	6.7%	7.1%	6.2%	8.3%
Internet	46.5%	39.9%	26.5%	23.0%	25.7%	28.3%
Social Media	6.2%	3.7%	4.5%	3.7%	.0%	4.3%
Radio	.0%	8.5%	3.9%	6.8%	16.6%	4.6%
Church – sermons and parish announcements	1.0%	.0%	5.1%	9.7%	.0%	4.9%
Television	5.2%	15.1%	36.2%	26.5%	21.7%	30.9%
Other	1.9%	.0%	2.9%	1.6%	18.4%	2.9%
Difficult to say	7.7%	6.0%	8.9%	13.5%	5.3%	9.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: own elaboration.

The next issue that needs consideration concerns the very understanding of the concept of secular state. Among Neuberger’s variants (1999), there are several options for implementing secularism in practice. In attempting to reach their imaginations, the respondents were asked to identify the postulates of the secular state from among several proposals. The results presented in Table 4 show that there is currently a homogeneous group of actions to be fulfilled for the implementation of the idea of a secular state: withdrawal of religion from schools (35.8%), liquidation of the Church fund (35.1%), the removal of religious symbols from public space (34.2%) and legalizing abortion (32.9%). However, data from Table 5 indicate that age does not significantly differentiate these respondents.

**Table 4.** Indications of the implementation of the secular state according to place of residence

Expression of the implementation of the secular state	Place of Residence					Total
	Village	Cities up to 20,000 residents	Cities from 20 to 100 thousand residents	Cities from 100 to 500 thousand residents	Cities over 500,000 residents	
Withdrawal of religion from schools	26.8%	30.0%	39.3%	48.8%	44.9%	35.8%
Liquidation of the Church fund	30.3%	32.9%	33.7%	39.6%	44.9%	35.1%
Removal of religious symbols from public space	25.2%	33.8%	37.5%	36.2%	48.9%	34.2%
Legalizing abortion	28.2%	34.9%	31.9%	33.8%	41.6%	32.9%
Breaking the concordat	21.5%	23.3%	28.5%	24.8%	37.1%	26.0%
Difficult to say	27.3%	26.0%	18.7%	16.5%	11.8%	21.4%
None	22.0%	17.0%	18.4%	17.1%	11.6%	18.2%

*Multi-choice questions, percentages do not add up to 100*

Source: own elaboration.

**Table 5.** The appearance of the implementation of the secular state by age

Expression of the implementation of the secular state?	Age			Total
	18–34 years	35–54 years	over 55	
Withdrawal of religion from schools	33.9%	36.3%	36.7%	35.8%
Liquidation of the Church fund	39.0%	36.0%	31.5%	35.1%
Removal of religious symbols from public space	34.9%	37.0%	31.0%	34.2%
Legalizing abortion	31.7%	33.5%	33.4%	32.9%
Breaking the concordat	28.3%	26.7%	23.7%	26.0%
Difficult to say	19.2%	23.4%	21.3%	21.4%
None	15.7%	18.9%	19.2%	18.2%

*Multi-choice questions, percentages do not add up to 100*

Source: own elaboration.

The character of the Church-state relationship that influences the type of state was the subject of the respondents’ reflections based on the interference of the state in the affairs of the Catholic Church and the interference of this Church in the affairs of the state and its law-making processes. According to Table 6, up to 65.3% of respondents share the opinion that after 1989, the Catholic Church repeatedly interfered in state policy and legislative issues. On the other hand, 21.7% denied this view. In the opposite situation, describing the interference of the state in

the life of the Church (Table 7), a significant group of respondents (39.5%) denied the repeated influence of the state on the Church, while 31.1% confirmed it.

Worth noting among respondents is the principle of the growth of beliefs concerning the influence of the Catholic Church on the state along with the increase in the number of inhabitants and their place of residence (Table 6 indicates an increase from 32.8% in rural areas to 46.8% in cities of over 500,000). However, this is not accompanied by a reverse tendency in the case of the state’s influence on the Catholic Church (Table 7).

**Table 6.** Interference of the Catholic Church in politics and creating laws from the perspective of the place of residence

After 1989 in Poland, did the Catholic Church often interfere in politics and issues for creating legislation?	Place of Residence					Total
	Village	Cities up to 20,000 residents	Cities from 20 to 100 thousand residents	Cities from 100 to 500 thousand residents	Cities over 500,000 residents	
Decidedly yes	32.8%	38.5%	42.0%	41.7%	46.8%	38.9%
Rather yes	25.3%	31.8%	26.1%	25.5%	25.0%	26.4%
Difficult to say	18.3%	10.7%	9.8%	9.6%	10.3%	13.0%
Rather not	16.3%	12.9%	16.1%	15.5%	11.9%	14.9%
Decidedly no	7.3%	6.1%	6.0%	7.7%	6.0%	6.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: own elaboration.

**Table 7.** State interference in the life of the Catholic Church from the perspective of place of residence

After 1989 in Poland, did the State often interfere in the organization and life of the Catholic Church?	Place of Residence					Total
	Village	Cities up to 20,000 residents	Cities from 20 to 100 thousand residents	Cities from 100 to 500 thousand residents	Cities over 500 thousand residents	
Decidedly yes	10.5%	17.1%	14.8%	7.6%	5.2%	11.0%
Rather yes	24.6%	26.7%	14.9%	18.1%	16.5%	21.0%
Difficult to say	20.1%	17.3%	19.5%	20.2%	13.8%	18.6%
Rather not	31.3%	27.1%	32.7%	33.9%	38.3%	32.3%
Decidedly no	13.5%	11.8%	18.2%	20.2%	26.2%	17.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: own elaboration.

Table 8 shows that the view of the Church’s intense interference in politics and legislative issues prevails among non-believers (75.7%). However, as shown in Table 9, regardless of their attitude towards religious beliefs, the distribution of the dominant view among respondents that the state did not interfere in the internal life of the Catholic Church is relatively even (31.6–39.3%). The data, therefore, indicate that there are more supporters of the view that the Church dominates over the state in issues shaping Church-state relations in Poland after 1989.

**Table 8.** Interference of the Catholic Church in politics and the creation of laws from the perspective of religious faith

Did the Catholic Church in Poland after 1989 often interfere in politics and legislative issues?	Attitude towards religious faith			
	Non-believer	Believer	No answer	Total
Decidedly yes	75.7%	33.5%	32.2%	38.9%
Rather yes	14.4%	28.1%	32.5%	26.4%
Difficult to say	5.4%	13.6%	30.6%	13.0%
Rather not	1.7%	17.3%	2.4%	14.9%
Decidedly no	2.8%	7.5%	2.3%	6.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: own elaboration.

**Table 9.** Interference of the state in the life of the Catholic Church from the perspective of attitude towards religious faith

Did the state of Poland after 1989 often interfere in the organization and life of the Catholic Church?	Attitude towards religious faith			
	Non-believer	Believer	No answer	Total
Decidedly yes	6.3%	12.0%	2.0%	11.0%
Rather yes	16.0%	21.7%	21.4%	21.0%
Difficult to say	12.5%	19.2%	28.5%	18.5%
Rather not	36.0%	31.6%	39.3%	32.4%
Decidedly no	29.2%	15.5%	8.8%	17.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: own elaboration.

*Discussion and Conclusions*

Focusing the reader's attention on establishing the sources of knowledge and the opinions of respondents on the subject of a secular state, I see several issues that must be discussed. First of all, the presented data should be read in the categories referenced to by Engelke (2010) as the media and religion turn. In the context of Poland, mass media predominated over other preferred sources of information in the general or local information area (Gierula 2016; Gierula & Jachimowski 2000; Jachimowski 2006). At the same time, as part of these analyses, the importance of direct communication was emphasized (Gierula, 2005). In the current study, it can be seen that the media plays a constitutive role in the process of acquiring knowledge and views on religious topics. This confirms the adopted H1 hypothesis. Lövheim's (2014) view presented in the context of high modernity countries is also justified in the context of post-communist Poland. We accurately perceived the topic of the relationship between the lack of religious belief and the acquisition of knowledge about religion from the Internet, but this requires a separate analysis.

The H2 hypothesis that *television and printed press play a fundamental role in providing knowledge about the secular state* in the light of the results of the research is subject to partial falsification. Television is included among the basic sources of information. However, the Internet took the place of the printed press, which clearly distinguishes the findings of this project from previous studies (McCloskey 2010). In the context of the basic medium for spreading the knowledge of a secular state, one more aspect is worth paying attention to. The weak participation of religious institutions in communicating content in sermons and parish announcements weakens the communicating power of traditional religious communities. This contributes to the transformation of religion and the search for something that unites in the space of digital media, for example, forums (Kołodziejaska 2014). This regularity, however, involves diversification in the choice of media. Table 6 shows that the larger the locality, the higher the preference for using the Internet as the main source of information about the secular state. When we combine this regularity with general Internet access in Poland, it is legitimate to state that the level of knowledge from the Internet depends on the degree of digital exclusion of a given region, especially in the Polish countryside (Popiołek 2013).

The answers confirming the truth of hypothesis H3 allow us to confront the obtained data from Neuberger's (1999) taxonomy. In fact, H3 is falsified. Only 26% of respondents endorse an

opinion, that the postulate of a secular state is combined with the need to break the concordat. In turn, two basic postulates with which respondents link the introduction of a secular state refer to the withdrawal of religion from schools (35.8%) and the liquidation of the Church fund 35.1%. This state of affairs explicitly excludes the possibility of implementing a type of Church-based relations based on recognized communities. Instead, a disproportion appears in the assessment of the Catholic Church's influence on the state and the state's influence on the Church after 1989. The fact that the respondents point to the lack of state interference in the Church's internal life prompts us to a certain type of separation. On the other hand, the Church influencing the legislative process reveals its real and symbolic power of action. In practice, the opinions of respondents indicate that the picture of Church-state relations provided to them mainly by the media: (1) overlaps with the endorsed Church model, however, it does not exclude the participation of other contents in it, and (2) indicates the Church's efficacy and pressure towards the state, and not the other way around.

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## Acknowledgements

The research reported in this article was funded by the National Science Centre, Poland (Project *Media towards the idea of a secular state*, grant no. 2014/15/N/HS5/00646).

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