As already briefly touched upon in the previous chapter, discussions about the competitive relation between word and image were not new to early modern Western Europe, but they greatly intensified when the issue became intertwined with religious controversies between Reformers and Catholics during the Reformation. Word, image and religion were indissolubly connected in the early modern era, and theological principles exerted a powerful influence over cultural practices. In this chapter, three significant cultural constraints are discussed in some detail to elucidate the ideological barriers faced by producers of illustrated religious literature in the Republic.

As recounted in the case of Willem Teellinck, the right use of religious imagery formed a focal point of discussions between Catholics and Protestants during the Reformation. Due to underlying differences in opinion on the hierarchy between word and image, it was virtually impossible to reconcile the two theologies. The Protestants assumed God’s Word to be superior to imagery, although humankind is by nature promptly stimulated and amused by visual representations, which are also easily remembered. They were convinced that the distance between God and the believer could not be bridged by the human eye, a view based on texts such as Hebrews 11:1: ‘faith is the evidence of things not seen’. Catholics defended the superiority of religious imagery with the argument that the visual arts stimulate the imaginative and commemorative power of the human mind in ways texts cannot, thus providing essential means for the communication between God and the believer.\(^2\)

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1 The Christian Church had a rich history of iconoclastic disputes far before the Reformation. See for instance Barber 2002.
2 See for a detailed analysis of these theological discussions for instance Dillenberger 1999.
Dutch sixteenth-century disputes on these issues had been dominated by Calvinist theology. As has been well established, Calvin was not opposed to all visual art. He proclaimed that all anthropomorphic representations of God or Jesus should be prohibited, and that images should not be used in public worship or in church. His opposition to the visual arts was—to put it simply—directed at the religious use of images: he meant to put an end to existing religious visual practices, but in the privacy of one’s home one could still enjoy portraits, historical paintings, and still-life compositions.

In the Republic, Protestant and Catholic attitudes towards the visual were negotiated and transformed into cultural conventions. That visual images and artifacts played a significant role in reconstructing individual and communal identities is obvious from the immense production of religious art in the Republic. However, as becomes apparent in the following chapters, the visual was looked upon with various degrees of distrust when it came to the act of religious reading. Three theological issues kept surfacing, steering and limiting authors, engravers and publishers of illustrated religious literature: the hierarchy of the senses, the role of emotions, and the ways in which God could or could not be represented in the arts. I will sketch the outlines of these issues in this chapter, drawing on a number of key texts published in the Republic.

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3 As Ilja Veldman has argued, public discussions in the Republic on the word-image issue in relation to religion came to rest around 1600, presumably because Protestantism had triumphed and extremist proclamations in its defence were no longer considered necessary. See Veldman 1999: 397–421, esp. 421. Rothstein 2005 addresses the medieval Dutch roots of these issues.

4 Most recently in Joby 2007b, and Zachman 2007. As Zachman argues, Calvin distinguished between ‘living’ and ‘dead’ images of God. Living images of God can be found in the Word of God itself and in the universe, while dead images are images created by human hands. Zachman also concluded that an irresolvable tension lies at the heart of Calvin’s discussion of the living images of God: ‘On the one hand, Calvin contrasts the ‘dead images’ that humans create, which are only the image of absent things, with the ‘living images’ instituted by God, […]’. On the other hand, Calvin rejects the use of images in worship on the basis of the invisible nature of God, which cannot be represented in any symbol or image’. See Zachman 2007: 437–440, quotation on 439–440.

5 See Hardy 1999: 1–16, esp. 16; and Michalski 1993: esp. 71. Landscapes, portraits and still lifes were to become the specialities of Dutch painters and engravers, be it as a direct result of Calvin’s preferences or not.

6 Also, in the sixteenth century, the process of revising and exchanging opinions on the issue of word, image and religion in the Low Countries was influenced by discussions carried out in literature. See for an analysis of the sixteenth-century situation, Crew 1978; Freedberg 1982: 133–153; Freedberg 1988: Chapter 3, and Adams 2007: 457–464.