Dutch religious culture went through a fundamental change in the transition from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century. The seventeenth century had been a turbulent period. First the Arminian Controversies had shaken Church and State. Order had been restored, but from the 1630s, as the Republic became a hotbed of novel ideas and inventions, heated discussions on theological issues flared up again. In addition to the debates that were a natural accompaniment to ongoing theological reflection, the philosophies of Descartes and later Spinoza, new developments in the natural sciences, as well as the impact of new-found peoples and their often exotic cultures, challenged a world-view based on the Ancients and the revealed truths of Scripture.

The eighteenth century presents a quite different picture. Theologians had apparently managed to encapsulate or absorb the once-contentious ideas, into new theological constructs. Churches and religious groups of whatever theological stripe played their role as guardians of piety and morality, side by side. Somewhere around the turn of the century ‘enlightened religion’ had quietly taken over. Later neo-Calvinist authors lamented this as a decline of vigour; those of a more liberal disposition took it for a mark of progress. It is more important, however, to find out what actually changed, how the new balance was achieved, and why the old battle-grounds could so easily be abandoned.

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1 Van Bunge, From Stevin to Spinoza; Israel, Radical Enlightenment; Fix, Prophecy and Reason.
2 Shapin and Schaffer, Leviathan and the Air-Pump, pp. 201–207; Vermij, Secularisering en natuurwetenschap; Ruestow, The Microscope; Jorink, Het Boeck der Natuere; Kooijmans, Gevaarlijke kennis; Vermij, The Calvinist Copernicans.
3 Wyss-Giacosa, Religionsbilder; Van Groesen, The Representations of the Overseas World; Mijnhardt, Religie, tolerantie en wetenschap; Hunt, Jacob and Mijnhardt, The Book that Changed Europe; Peters, De wijze koopman.
4 Overview of Dutch church history in Van Eijnatten and Van Lieburg, Nederlandse religiegeschiedenis; decline: Evenhuis, Ook dat was Amsterdam, IV, pp. 31–35; progress: Van der Wall, Religie en Verlichting; Van der Wall, Een veelzijdige verstandhouding.
Several approaches towards answering these questions are possible. This book looks at graphic satire. Like a weathervane, this medium can be used to show shifting directions in ways to present religion to a wider public. This was a sensitive area. Secular power maintained the central tenets of Christianity in general. Preferential treatment was given to the interpretation sanctioned by the public, Reformed Church. Those outside the charmed circles of power were strongly discouraged from publicly venting criticism on the religious policy of magistrates or the inner workings of the ecclesiastical establishment. Who dared to unleash the biting dogs of satire into the hunting preserve of academic theologians, guarded against poachers by the strong arm of secular justice? And which were their primary targets?

Understandably, the creators of graphic satire took care to camouflage themselves and, to some extent, even their message. Their prints are typically anonymous and undated, accompanied by rhymed dialogues that make little sense to anyone who is not already acquainted with the issues under discussion. Central to my argument is the interpretation of three prints. They are well done, but are not ‘high art’. They contain references to people known to be involved in the religious conflicts in the Dutch Reformed Church in the later seventeenth century—and also puzzling elements like pumpkins, pigs and popish demons. It is obvious that they are satirical in nature, but they are otherwise incomprehensible at first sight. Satirical prints, being topical, always require some exploration of the historical context in which they stand, because without this background knowledge it hard to read their message. Seventeenth century emblematic satirists gloried in presenting their audiences with elaborate puzzles. The genre went out of fashion in the eighteenth century, yielding its place to the more straightforward caricature. For our period, getting the joke is a laborious business. If this is true for political satire, it is doubly so for the satires on religion. What did these few prints have to say, and to whom?

6 These ‘core’ prints are the subject of chapters 5–7. Cf. Muller, De Nederlandsche geschiedenis in platen, I, p. ix.