CENTER VALLEY (October 8, 2006) – Apparently words do matter. Globally, the academic words spoken in Germany by a Roman Pontiff sparked violent outrage in the Islamic world. Locally, the merciful words uttered more quietly by Amish mourners jolted the sensibility of “outsiders” prone to respond to violence with cries for justice.

In both cases, unrelated though they seem, the voices express deep-seated convictions. In both instances, the culture shock to our ordinary sensibilities can have a beneficial impact, if we dare to consider the implications. John Maynard Keynes was right: “Words … are the assault of thoughts on the unthinking.”

In the aftermath of Benedict XVI’s speech at the University of Regensburg, the “assault” that Keynes describes turned from metaphor to reality, as denunciations were decreed, associates were attacked, and buildings were bombed. But more invidious is the idea underlying these reactions. What threatens a longer-term contamination of our cultural consciousness is the notion that words, especially those of the religious variety, should not be used if they may lead to someone’s taking offense at what is said.

In vogue since the dust-up over Danish cartoons, this operative principle guided the recent decision by a German opera house to cancel a three-year-old production of Mozart which included a scene showing the severed heads of Muhammad, Jesus, and Buddha. Apparently, even artistic language with its dramatic license now must be curtailed in the name of safety.

But this kind of security comes with a steep price. Lamenting the opera house’s decision, Bernd Neumann, the German government’s top cultural official, astutely observed that, “When the concern over possible protests leads to self-censorship, then the democratic culture of free speech becomes endangered.”
That danger remains clear and present in the world of higher education, where words have power because they express ideas, and ideas have consequences because they shape lives. When we engage young people in an exploration of the nature of God, or in debate about the place of forgiveness in a just society, this is not merely a mental exercise. Rather, our purpose is to enable them to form personal convictions, which in turn will govern the decisions and actions that constitute who they are.

For this reason, a cultural engagement with religious ideas should be considered paramount, not only in the incubators of thought that are our colleges and universities, but in any arena that serves the public. To avoid what is controversial because it may be misinterpreted as giving offense remains far riskier in as much as threatens to short-circuit our thinking about ultimate reality.

Initial reporting of the pope’s speech failed to take into consideration the context provided by his earlier address to Muslim representatives. If, as he claimed, the dialogue between East and West, between Muslims and Christians, is vital to our global well-being, then “There is no room for apathy and disengagement, and even less for partiality and sectarianism. We must not yield to fear or pessimism. Rather, we must cultivate optimism and hope.”

Sadly, current world events suggest that fear and pessimism are prevailing. In this climate, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between reason and passion. Conviction comes to be mistaken as arrogance, religious thinking dismissed as an unnecessary imposition of beliefs, and artistic expression censored as a danger to public safety. We seem to be slouching into the false comfort of believing that our differences do not really make a difference, so perhaps we should just avoid them altogether.

Risks of violence and threats to well-being should, of course, be taken seriously. But so should thought and the dialogue of ideas that gives rise to it. If, instead, we avoid a critical encounter with religious subjects, then we risk engendering a false tolerance of conflicting ideas, which in turn would close, rather than foster, cultural dialogue. Unless and until we acknowledge seriously the differing convictions that we hold, we will have no starting point with which to engage each other – individually and culturally – in a mutual pursuit of what is true and good.

This is precisely why the pope’s speech took the form of an academic lecture. As James Schall, a Jesuit professor of political philosophy at Georgetown University, rightly notes, that is a format “whose only public claim was its own intrinsic reasonableness” and whose very nature “demands not passion but reason to grasp what it says.”

Understanding requires thought. Thinking considers ideas. Ideas are based on reason and expressed in words. And real dialogue demands that those words be spoken with courage and acted upon with conviction. We cannot make progress, personally or socially or globally, if we remain silent.