

Prof. Dr. Peter-André Alt

Welcome Address by the President of Freie Universität for the Freedom Award of Freie Universität Berlin 2010 Award Ceremony

November 15th, 2010 at 5:00 pm at Henry Ford Building

- ES GILT DAS GESPROCHENE WORT -

Dear Professor Robinson,

Sehr verehrte Frau Prof. Limbach,

Sehr verehrter Herr Dr. von Weizsäcker,

Excellencies,

Dear Colleagues and Students,

Dear Guests and Friends of Freie Universität Berlin,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As a relatively young institution with non-traditional origins and often anti-traditionalist leanings, Freie Universität is not exactly known for award ceremonies of prizes and medals. These words on today's occasion may sound like a confession of a deficit; yet that is precisely how they ought not to be understood. Exceptions confirm the rule, rarities have particular value, and the founding of traditions is clearly as significant as their celebration decades and centuries later. The Freedom Award of Freie Universität is meant to be such an exception. I thus take great pleasure in welcoming you to a highlight of our academic year, an exceptional occasion - the awarding of the Freedom Award of Freie Universität Berlin.

Why should a university award a prize – a prize, moreover, that is not academic in nature - dedicated to freedom? The answer is inextricably bound to the origins of Freie Universität and to the institutional identity of this university; an identity - of course – that draws on these origins. As a response to political and ideological pressures in the Soviet-controlled sector of post World War II Berlin, Freie Universität was founded in 1948 by students and professors who were calling for just that: a free university. Their simple-sounding appeal to the ideal of freedom had a very concrete meaning under the threatening circumstances, and it was the simplicity of this call that formed part of its force. The founding history of Freie Universität is also a lesson on how normative ideals can forcefully articulate the need for action and change. Veritas-Iustitia-Libertas: It is these three concepts in our motto that expressed a need that was urgent at the time of Freie Universität's founding, and it is these three concepts in their characteristic interplay that remain active today: as a normative force that guides our actions for the future, at the same time a source of questioning and a point of orientation.

There is one element that I need to add to complete the picture. A key reason why the founding story of Freie Universität did not end with appeals to and discussions of normative ideals was the international support that the initiative received. This was true locally for the allies in West Berlin, and it was true internationally. The name of this building is still a symbol of the kind of material support that Freie Universität received during its founding period – material support in addition to political and ideal support. Based on this founding history, Freie Universität has later seized opportunities to help other institutions internationally. It has acted on its commitment to freedom, and it has sought to recognize those who have rendered service to the cause of freedom around the world, most recently by instituting the international Freedom Award.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we have gathered today for the awarding of the fourth Freedom Award of Freie Universität. After Kim Dae-jung, Wladyslaw Bartoszewski and Desmond Tutu - a sequence of three men - this year we are delighted to honor an exceptional woman who is, among so many other things, also an academic colleague. Professor Robinson, on behalf of Freie Universität Berlin, I welcome you most cordially to our campus in Dahlem.

Based on my brief sketch of this university's founding history and identity, I trust that it won't come as a surprise to you when I say that it is truly an inspiration for our academic community to honor with you a scholar who has achieved so much as a politician, a head of state, a high officer of the United Nations, and – last but by no means least - an activist within civil society. There are obviously very few, if any, arenas of public action where you have not acted, and in all of them, you have stood up for human rights in order to make a difference in a very concrete way felt at a grassroots level. Whether as a student and later as a Senator in Ireland, arguing and acting for gender equality and the rights of minorities in a predominantly traditionalist environment, or later as President of the Republic of Ireland, whose visits to Somalia and Rwanda are unforgotten – you have proceeded with great courage, eloquence and perseverance. It was your voice that brought world attention to the suffering in Rwanda in the aftermath of the civil war, and it was your account that put into focus the unfolding catastrophe in Somalia.

There is another striking mark on your political record that I cannot resist to mention: Your readiness to hear the other side. Whether in Northern Ireland or in Tibet, you have not shied away from crossing political boundaries, simply by communicating directly with those who were marginalized or shut out in the dominant political constellation. Your courage and capacity to do so must be an inspiration to anyone concerned with the cause of freedom and justice.

As United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights you bestowed new importance on this office by focusing world attention on human rights, by making their protection a key element of UN policy, and by working for standards that enable not just declarations, but checks and action.

Following your time as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, you have continued your struggle for human rights by founding “Realizing Rights” and by becoming a member of the Elders. The program of “Realizing Rights” is summarized in the title itself and in the subtitle: “The Ethical Globalization Initiative”. You are thus continuing to act, this time focusing on an agenda that can secure the positive potential of globalization. Decent work, the right to health, climate justice, women's leadership, corporate responsibility –

these are but a few objectives that you have subsumed under the heading of an ethical globalization.

We are grateful, and we wish that you may feel well among us here at a university that carries the concept of freedom in its very name, and the ideal of justice in its motto. Welcome at Freie Universität Berlin.