



## Three Visions of Liberty: Berlin, Tahtawi and Tagore

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### ABSTRACT

Liberty has long been a fundamental concept in political theory, symbolizing the individual's right to act freely within society. From ancient political thought to modern democratic frameworks, liberty has been interpreted in various ways depending on historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts. Some have seen it as freedom from external control, while others view it as the capacity to live according to one's values within a just society<sup>1</sup>. While liberty has long been a central ideal in Western political theory, seeing it through a global lens exposes new, equally interesting views. Thinkers from various cultural and religious origins have defined freedom in ways that reflect their distinct historical and philosophical settings. This paper investigates conflicting views of liberty from the perspectives of Isaiah Berlin, Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, and Rabindranath Tagore, as well as how different civilizations address issues of authority, individual rights, and moral duty. Such a comparative approach is critical in a world where liberal values are argued, updated, and even challenged across borders. Engaging with these three thinkers tells us that liberty can be considered not merely a political arrangement, but also a spiritual, moral, and communal goal. This paper explores these dimensions of liberty through the perspectives of three major political thinkers, examining how their ideas contribute to our understanding of freedom, authority, and the social order.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This research paper, "Three Visions of Freedom: Berlin, Tahtawi, and Tagore," offers a compelling comparative analysis of the concept of freedom from the perspectives of three diverse political thinkers. It aims to bridge Western and non-Western perspectives on a fundamental political concept, moving beyond a Eurocentric understanding. The introduction effectively establishes the importance of freedom in political theory and highlights the different interpretations across cultures. The rationale for the comparative approach, particularly in a world where liberal values are contested, is clear. The division of freedom into its subcomponents (meaning, limits, relationship to state/law, religion, and goals) provides a clear roadmap for subsequent analysis.

The research question, "How have political thinkers understood freedom, and what do their views reveal about the relationship between freedom, law, and society?" is broad, but it is adequately addressed through a comparative framework. The Conceptual Framework section presents key definitions of freedom from thinkers such as Quentin Skinner, Philip Pettit, and John Stuart Mill, providing a solid theoretical foundation. The inclusion of Alexis de Tocqueville's views on liberty, democracy, and equality is also valuable, offering an important Western perspective on the challenges of preserving liberty in a democratic society. The "Notes on Thinkers" and "Biographical Notes" sections are well-structured and provide concise and relevant background information on Isaiah Berlin, Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, and Rabindranath Tagore. This context is crucial for understanding the historical and philosophical foundations of their views on liberty.

A comparative analysis, organized around the sub-elements of liberty, forms the core of this paper. Each section (the meaning of liberty, the limits of liberty, liberty and the state/law, liberty and religion, and the aims and consequences of liberty) systematically compares the views of Berlin, al-Tahtawi, and Tagore. The use of clear headings and concise summaries facilitates the understanding of complex ideas. The "Similarities and Differences" subsections highlight nuances and contrasting perspectives. The explanatory table at the end of the comparative analysis is an excellent summarizing tool, providing a quick and clear overview of each thinker's position on various aspects of freedom.

The conclusion effectively summarizes the main arguments, reiterating the distinct approaches of Berlin, Tahtawi, and Tagore, while identifying commonalities, such as the importance of individual dignity, freedom from constraints, the connection to development, and freedom as responsibility. The case study, "Applying the Ideas of the Three Thinkers Directly to Resolving the Problem of Amending the Egyptian Constitution in 2014," is an innovative and commendable addition. It demonstrates the practical applicability of the theoretical insights discussed, making the research more impactful and relevant. This section thoughtfully links abstract concepts of freedom to a concrete political event, showing how Tahtawi's emphasis on enlightenment and the common good, Berlin's distinction between negative and positive

freedom, and Tagore's call for unity and tolerance can inform constitutional reform.

### **Research Question**

How have political thinkers understood liberty, and what do their views reveal about the relationship between freedom, law, and society?

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Liberty can be broadly understood as the condition in which individuals are free from domination and allowed to pursue their own goals. Quentin Skinner argues that liberty, in the republican tradition, is not merely non-interference but the absence of dependence on arbitrary power. True freedom exists only when individuals are protected by laws that prevent domination. Similarly, Philip Pettit defines liberty as non-domination, emphasising that freedom requires institutional guarantees against unchecked authority, even in cases where no direct interference occurs. Both thinkers highlight that liberty is not just about personal choice, but also about the structures that ensure individuals are not vulnerable to control.

Liberty is the individual's ability to make decisions and take actions of their own choosing without coercion or unfair restriction. It is a fundamental human right to think, express, move, believe and participate in society freely and responsibly. John Stuart Mill forms a kind of link between the doctrines of the earlier English empiricist school and those we associate with Sir Herbert Spencer. In his book *On Liberty*, Mill defends the rights of the individual against society at the dawn of an era that was quickly coming to the conclusion that the individual had no absolute rights over society. From these perspectives, the author (Dr. Callister Lol) believes that liberty as a legal and social concept is being overlooked. She argues that liberty is a special type of relationship between individuals, between them and institutions, or between them and the state. Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) was a French political thinker and historian best known for his work *Democracy in America*, in which he analysed the political and social systems of the United States. His observations on liberty, democracy and equality remain highly influential in political philosophy and democratic theory.

Tocqueville's major contribution to the concept of liberty is found in his work *Democracy in America* (1835–1840), where he explores how democratic institutions affect individual freedom, social behaviour and political structures. For Tocqueville, liberty is the ability of individuals to act independently within a framework of law and civic responsibility. He saw liberty as a balance between personal freedom and the need for a functioning democratic society. Tocqueville admired the United States for its commitment to local self-governance, freedom of speech and active civil society also Tocqueville believed that equality and liberty are both essential to a healthy democracy, but must be carefully balanced. He warned that an excessive desire for equality could lead to 'soft despotism,' where people willingly sacrifice their freedom for state-provided comfort and security. In such societies, citizens become passive, and centralised governments can gradually erode liberty.

### Note on the Thinkers

- Isaiah Berlin was a British philosopher best known for his 1958 lecture *Two Concepts of Liberty*, where he distinguished between negative liberty (freedom from interference) and positive liberty (freedom to shape one's own life). He warned that positive liberty could be misused to justify authoritarian control. His work emphasised value pluralism and remains central to modern liberal thought.
- Rifa'a al-Tahtawi was an Egyptian reformist thinker who blended Islamic principles with Enlightenment ideas to develop a multi-dimensional concept of liberty. He identified five types: natural, social, religious, civic, and political freedom. He emphasised equality before the law for all citizens, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, and linked liberty with justice. His thought marked a major shift in Arab political philosophy, promoting legal reform, civil rights, and participation in governance.
- Rabindranath Tagore was an Indian philosopher and poet who viewed true liberty as spiritual and inner freedom, achieved through love, compassion, and harmony with the universe. He saw political and social freedom as necessary but secondary to this deeper liberation. Tagore emphasised education as key to freeing the mind and believed that true freedom involves moral responsibility and self-awareness, not just independence from external control.

### Biography

- Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997) was a British philosopher and historian of ideas, born in Riga (then part of the Russian Empire). His family moved to the UK in 1921. He studied at Oxford, where he later became a professor and prominent public intellectual. Berlin is best known for his 1958 lecture "Two Concepts of Liberty," where he defined negative liberty and positive liberty. During WWII, he travelled to the U.S. as part of Britain's diplomatic service. His method emphasised value pluralism the idea that different, conflicting values can be equally valid. He was a strong defender of liberalism and an opponent of political extremism.
- Rifa'ah Rafi al-Tahtawi (1801–1873) was one of the first Egyptians to grapple with the question of adjusting to the West and to provide answers in Islamic terms. He studied at Al-Azhar University, where he received a traditional Islamic education in theology, law, and Arabic literature. In 1826, under the rule of Muhammad Ali Pasha, he was selected as the imam for a group of Egyptian students sent to Paris to study Western sciences and military techniques. During his five-year stay in France (1826–1831), al-Tahtawi immersed himself in European culture, philosophy, political ideas, and sciences. He learned French and began translating European works into Arabic, aiming to modernise Egypt by merging Islamic principles with modern knowledge.
- Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941): A Bengali poet, philosopher, and thinker, he was born in the Bengali section of Calcutta in 1861 to a noble Bengali family. Known as a religious thinker, Tagore studied Sanskrit (his native language) and its literature, as well as English. He was a prolific writer of

Sufi poetry and deep contemplation, and established an open-air school in his hometown where he taught his Sufi views. His fame as a poet and musician began at the age of eighteen. The Stockholm Academy awarded him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. In 1918, he established a philosophical school known as Visva-Bharati, or the Indian University of Higher Education. Tagore died on 7 August 1941 in Calcutta

## METHODOLOGY

This research paper primarily relies on a comparative textual analysis of the philosophical and political writings of Isaiah Berlin, Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, and Rabindranath Tagore. Details of the Methodological Components:

- Selection of Thinkers: The paper strategically selects three prominent thinkers from distinct cultural and intellectual traditions (Western liberalism, Islamic reformism, and Indian spiritual/philosophical thought). This selection is crucial to achieving a "Universal Vision" of freedom.
- Conceptual Deconstruction: The concept of freedom is divided into main subcomponents:
  1. The meaning of freedom
  2. The limits of freedom
  3. Freedom and the state/law
  4. Freedom and religion
  5. The goals and consequences of freedom

This methodological deconstruction provides an organized framework for comparative analysis, ensuring that all relevant dimensions of freedom are explored through the selected thinkers.

- Interpretation and Hermeneutics: In each sub-component, the research addresses the interpretation of the ideas of the selected thinkers. This includes:
  - Direct interpretation: Presenting each thinker's definition and understanding of freedom and its related aspects (e.g., Berlin's negative versus positive freedom, Tahtawi's five types, Tagore's inner freedom).
  - Context: Briefly situating each thinker's ideas within their historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts (e.g., Berlin's post-totalitarian experience, Tahtawi's Egyptian modernization, Tagore's colonial India). This helps explain the reasons for their divergent views.
- Comparative analysis: The core of the methodology lies in systematically comparing and contrasting the thinkers' views on each sub-theme. This includes:
  - Identifying similarities: Identifying areas of convergence between their ideas despite their different backgrounds.
  - Highlighting differences: Explaining the different viewpoints and their reasons.
  - Connecting ideas: Showing how their ideas relate to broader themes in political philosophy (e.g., the tension between individual autonomy and social order, and the role of religion in public life).

- **Synthesis and Generalization:** The conclusion summarizes the findings, summarizing the unique contributions of each thinker, while identifying overarching commonalities regarding the value and implications of freedom.
- **Application (Case Study):** The inclusion of a case study on the 2014 Egyptian constitutional amendment is an applied part of the methodology. It demonstrates the evidential value and practical relevance of the developed theoretical framework by applying the insights of the three thinkers to a real-life political issue. This adds an empirical dimension to theoretical research.

The methodology is qualitative and analytical, relying on a careful reading and interpretation of primary and secondary sources related to the selected thinkers. It uses a structured comparative framework to uncover the universal and culturally specific dimensions of the concept of freedom.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Comparison

Liberty is a cornerstone of political theory, its definition varies greatly depending on factors like cultural, history, and philosophical environment. This paper aims to examine the concepts of three significant thinkers: Isaiah Berlin, Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, and Rabindranath Tagore, all of whom addressed the subject of what it means to be free. Their perspectives not only define liberty differently but also offer varied views on its limits, its relationship to the state and religion, and its ultimate purpose. And to answer the research question (How have political thinkers understood liberty, and what do their views reveal about the relationship between freedom, law, and society?), a comparative analysis needs to be done to explain the different angles of the concept and how each thinker views it.

### What Liberty Means

Isaiah Berlin made a well-known distinction between positive and negative liberty. The absence of outside intervention, being free to do as one pleases, is known as negative liberty. The power to achieve one's "True" will, on the other hand, is known as positive liberty. Berlin cautioned that even with the best of intentions, positive liberty can quickly devolve into authoritarianism when others assert that they are better able to understand what one "truly" wants.

Rifa' a al-Tahtawi took a more comprehensive, socially conscious approach to liberty. He distinguished between five categories of freedom: civic, religious, social, political and natural. Tahtawi believed that liberty was deeply interconnected with Islamic principles and was not only a secular phenomenon. It was believed that a society where true liberty thrived was characterised by justice, equality before the law and involvement in public life.

Rabindranath Tagore gave the idea of freedom a spiritual component. He believed that inner freedom, the liberation from egoism, ignorance, and selfish desire, was the ultimate definition of liberty. Only as a step toward the larger objective of spiritual and personal fulfilment did political independence

have any meaning. External freedoms were meaningless without inner harmony.

### **Similarities and Differences**

All three thinkers see liberty as crucial to human dignity. Berlin emphasizes external non-interference, whereas Tahtawi associate's liberty with law, religion, and civic life and Tagore sees it as a spiritual journey.

While Berlin's negative liberty emphasizes the protection of personal choice from external constraints, Tahtawi's view advocates that liberty be included into a collective moral and civic framework. Tagore sees liberty as an inner existential awakening that transcends all political institutions.

While liberty is universally respected, its location varies significantly between the three: in the individual's external choices, the community's legal fabric, and the soul's inner realisation. (Why do they have different views?) Each thinker formed their theories in response to different historical contexts: Berlin following totalitarian regimes in Europe, Tahtawi during Egypt's early modernisation under Muhammad Ali, and Tagore during British colonial control in India. Their understandings of liberty reflect these circumstances, whether as a defence against political oppression, a vision for social reform through education and religion, or a path to national and spiritual independence

### **Limits of Liberty**

Isaiah Berlin believed that liberty should be regulated to prevent harm to others. He was extremely sceptical of any philosophy that justified force in the name of higher principles, viewing it as a betrayal of actual freedom. Rifa'a al-Tahtawi believed that limitations were vital for preventing chaos. Liberty must align with Islamic law and serve the greater welfare. Without such limitations, freedom would devolve into anarchy rather than providing justice. Rabindranath Tagore saw limitations from a different perspective. He claimed that true freedom requires self-restraint and an ethical conscience developed by compassion and love. Without inner discipline, liberty devolved into selfishness.

### **Similarities and Differences**

While all three thinkers agree that liberty without limits is dangerous, they differ sharply on what imposes the limit. Berlin's caution revolves around external, institutional safeguards to prevent violence or coercion. Tahtawi introduces a dual limitation: divine law and civic duty, merging religious ethics with societal order. Tagore, by contrast, shifts the ground inward, arguing that liberty must be bounded by individual conscience, not law.

The core contrast lies between external versus internal foundations of limitation as Berlin and Tahtawi emphasize societal and legal structures, whereas Tagore insists on a moral structure within the self. Example: The dangers of unlimited liberty can be seen in modern examples such as unmoderated online speech, which may threaten social cohesion, or in theocratic regimes where liberty is suppressed in the name of divine law. These examples echo Berlin's concern about totalitarianism cloaked in moral purpose,

Tahtawi's emphasis on balanced reform, and Tagore's insistence on ethical self-restraint.

### **Liberty and the State/Law**

Isaiah Berlin envisioned the state as a minimal guardian of negative liberty. Its role was not to tell people how to live but to prevent coercion and interference. However, Rifa'a al-Tahtawi viewed the state as an active force for good. Constitutional improvements and legal equality can promote a society that values both individual rights and religious principles. Rabindranath Tagore kept a critical distance from the concept of the state, and even that he recognized its importance in combating oppression, he concluded that it cannot foster true inner freedom.

### **Similarities and Differences**

All three thinkers acknowledge the necessity of the state, but the degree of trust they place in it varies markedly. Berlin endorses a state strong enough to protect liberty but weak enough to avoid tyranny; Tahtawi embraces a reformist state as a guarantor of both civil rights and moral order. Tagore, however, warns that even well-intentioned states cannot cultivate the inner virtues true liberty demands. Thus, while Berlin and Tahtawi see positive potential in structured governance (albeit to different extents), Tagore remains sceptical, preferring a vision where the ultimate responsibility for freedom lies not with the state, but with the ethical self.

### **Liberty and Religion**

For Isaiah Berlin, religion was acceptable only when it respected personal freedom. Organized religion that imposed a single moral truth was viewed with suspicion. In contrast, Rifa 'a al-Tahtawi argued that properly understood, Islam was compatible with, and indeed supportive of, liberty. He saw no contradiction between religious commitment and modern notions of justice and equality. Rabindranath Tagore presented another perspective: real religion was a universal spiritual experience that freed the soul. Institutional religion, he believed, risked becoming an oppressive force unless it directed to greater inner freedom.

### **Similarities and Differences**

All three thinkers recognise that religion can both support and endanger liberty. Berlin defends religious freedom cautiously, fearing the imposition of rigid orthodoxy; Tahtawi harmonises religious law and civic liberty under a reinterpreted Islamic framework; Tagore transcends doctrinal religion altogether, embracing an inner spirituality beyond institutions. While Berlin's stance remains secular, Tahtawi's is reformist within tradition, and Tagore's is transformative beyond tradition, each offering a distinct negotiation between faith and freedom.

### **Goals and Outcomes of Liberty**

Berlin views liberty as the foundation of a heterogeneous society, allowing individuals to pursue varied values. Its ultimate goal is autonomy and coexistence without compulsion. As Berlin writes, "The pursuit of the ideal of self-mastery may lead to the enthronement of a despot" (Berlin, 1969, p. 132). His warning reveals the paradox at the heart of positive liberty, that the desire

to empower the self may open the door to domination by others who claim to know one's true interests.

Rifa'a al-Tahtawi viewed liberty as crucial for national prosperity, civic equality, and moral advancement. It was a method of implementing social transformation while adhering to Islamic precepts. Rabindranath Tagore saw liberty as a means of spiritual enlightenment and global solidarity. The ultimate goal was to realise humanity's divine potential, not just express oneself.

**Similarities and Differences**

Each thinker envisions liberty not as an end in itself, but as a means to higher human flourishing. Berlin sees flourishing in terms of pluralism and individual judgment; Tahtawi sees it in terms of societal justice and moral betterment; Tagore sees it as spiritual illumination.

Their visions reflect broader cultural traditions: Berlin's Western liberalism, Tahtawi's Islamic modernism, and Tagore's cosmopolitan spiritualism. Liberty, for all three, is transformative, but the transformation sought ranges from civic equality to existential awakening.

Table 1. Explanatory Table

Aspect	Isaiah Berlin	Rifa 'a al-Tahtawi	Rabindranath Tagore
<b>Liberty:</b>	Negative (freedom from interference) and positive (self-mastery).	Five types are tied to law, religion, and society.	Inner, spiritual freedom from ego and desire.
<b>Limits:</b>	External limits to prevent harm.	Legal and religious boundaries.	Self-imposed ethical conscience.
<b>Role of the State:</b>	Minimal protection of individual freedom.	Active reformer ensuring justice and rights.	Distrustful; can't provide inner freedom.
<b>Religion:</b>	Tolerated if non-coercive.	Integrated with liberty and law.	True religion is personal and liberating.
<b>Goal of Liberty:</b>	Autonomy and pluralism.	National and moral progress.	Spiritual awakening and unity.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

To conclude, Berlin's vision centres on negative liberation if influenced by external interference, and positive liberty in the ability to self-determination, warning against the dangers of positivity if misunderstood. Meanwhile, Tahtawi, who focuses on liberty in the context of the Renaissance, advocates for liberty from tyranny and ignorance, guaranteeing individual and social rights, and national independence. However, Tagore's approach, which views liberty from a spiritual, human, and cultural perspective, is based on inner liberation, the unity of the universe, and creative expression."

This difference between the three thinkers can be summarised as follows:

- Berlin: negative liberty (The Absence of Coercive Interference), positive liberty (The Ability to Self-Determination).
- Tahtawi: liberty from tyranny and ignorance, individual and social rights, and national independence.
- Tagore: Inner liberation, unity with the universe, creative and spiritual expression. The three thinkers present different aspects of the concept of freedom. Berlin's approach is philosophical analysis, Tahtawi's is social and political reform, and Tagore's approach is the spiritual and personal dimension. There are common points: liberty is a fundamental value for societies for the three thinkers, and this is achieved through: "For example, the importance and dignity of the individual. All three, in one way or another, see liberty as linked to an appreciation of the individual's worth and right to a dignified and independent life.
- The emphasis on liberty from constraints, whether external (Interference by others, Tyranny) or internal (Ignorance, Whims), represents the essence of liberty for them.
- Liberty is linked to development and progress, as they see liberty as essential for individual and societal progress, whether through intellectual and cognitive growth (Tahtawi), self-realization and creative expression (Tagore), or empowering individuals to exercise their choices and contribute to society (Berlin).
- Considering liberty as a responsibility, although the focus varies, they implicitly or explicitly see liberty as not merely the absence of restrictions but rather as the individual's responsibility to use their liberty consciously and responsibly.

Case study: Applying the ideas of the three thinkers directly to solve the problem of changing Egypt's constitution in 2014: The three thinkers can be consulted, as their ideas may contribute to enriching the debate on the constitutional amendment at that time in 2014: Among the ideas of Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (Enlightenment and Modernization), al-Tahtawi called for openness to modern ideas and developments in the West while preserving national identity. In the context of constitutional amendment, this principle can be utilized to study comparative constitutional experiences and consider international best practices, adapting them to suit the Egyptian reality.

Al-Tahtawi emphasized the importance of achieving the public interest and justice in governance. When amending the constitution, the primary goal should be to promote citizens' rights and achieve their interests and aspirations. This is what he called the principle of "Public Interest". Also, al-Tahtawi believed that education is the foundation of progress. In the constitutional amendment process, it is important to engage the public and raise awareness of the importance of the constitution and the impact of the proposed amendments on their lives. Community dialogues and workshops can be organized to promote informed participation.

The Idea of Negative and Positive Liberty (Isaiah Berlin): The Value of Negative and Positive Liberty: Berlin distinguished between two concepts of liberty: negative freedom (freedom from external constraints) and positive

liberty (the ability to define oneself and achieve one's goals) When amending the constitution, consideration must be given to how to enhance both types of liberty for citizens, while ensuring that the exercise of one's liberty does not infringe upon the liberty of others.

Berlin emphasised that there are multiple, sometimes conflicting, human values, and that no single value system is necessarily correct. In amending the constitution, the diversity of opinions and interests within Egyptian society must be taken into account, and a fair balance must be sought between them.

He also cautioned against totalitarian solutions, as Berlin warned against adopting totalitarian ideologies that claim to possess absolute truth. In amending the constitution, it is important to adopt a realistic and practical approach that takes into account the various complexities and challenges and avoids imposing a single vision on everyone.

Unity, Humanity, and Tolerance (Rabindranath Tagore): Tagore called for transcending national and religious divisions and promoting a sense of human unity and tolerance among cultures. When amending the constitution, this idea can be leveraged to emphasize the principles of equal citizenship, non-discrimination, protection of minority rights, and strengthening social cohesion. Also, the balance between spirituality and materialism, as Tagore emphasized the importance of achieving a balance between the spiritual and material aspects of human and societal life, can be considered in the context of amending the constitution, considering how to incorporate moral and spiritual values that contribute to building a more just and compassionate society. Perhaps Tagore emphasized the importance of creativity and free expression as an essential part of human and social development. It would be possible to leverage this in amending the constitution to ensure the protection of liberty of expression, thought, and art, and to encourage cultural participation in line with the nature of Egyptian society.

## **FURTHER STUDY**

This research still has limitations so further research is still needed on this topic.

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