A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

- Harold Lindsell

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CHAPTER ONE

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"Jesus of Nazareth taught men to see the operation of God in the regular and normal – in the rising of the sun, in the falling of the rain, the growth of the seed into the plant. If men had been ready to follow him in this, much of the actual conflict between Religion and Science would have been avoided."

– William Temple

"Sri Ramakrishna's simple words and illustrations have such a force of directness and irresistibility because [...]. They were the outcome of his direct experience."

– Max Muller

1.1 Christ and Ramakrishna as Parabolists

Jesus Christ and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa are supreme examples of ideal parabolists in world literature. The parable, as a literary device, in their hands became the most potent channel of creative communication. Their parables are at once deceptively simple and deeply profound. And their impact on the lettered and the unlettered was equally longlasting and demystifying from a formalistic viewpoint. The 'story value' of the parable would freely lend itself as the easily accessible medium to reach out to the lowly of the lowliest.
The parabolists Jesus Christ and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa have expounded through their parables the divine truth about God, the kingdom of God and the path to be followed to attain salvation. (Matt. 13.1-9, Luke 15.11-32; TP 18, 49, 56) Their profound spiritual knowledge, gained through their intimate contact with God, is revealed in their parables. (Matt 24.36-44, Luke 10.25-37; TP 159)

As parabolists Jesus Christ and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa have used the parabolic method in order to impart the spiritual truth and the divine knowledge to the common mob who flocked around them with eagerness and spiritual thirst and hunger. (Matt. 13.13-15; TP 100) They were uneducated and humble folks who were not aware of God and salvation and the path to be followed to attain the kingdom of God. (Matt. 13.31,32, Mark 4.13-32, Luke 16.1-13; TP 88,97)

Jesus Christ, believed to be the son of God by the Christians, was sent by God the Father in heaven to this world to preach the Gospel of the kingdom of God. He came to this world as a man to show the path of salvation and he has revealed that he is the only way to attain salvation and reach heaven. (John 14.6) He was filled with the Holy Spirit and even when he was twelve years old he was found in the synagogue forcefully discussing and sharing his views
on God with the elders. (Luke 2.41-52) He inherited the ‘natural instinct’ from God and he was filled with the divine wisdom to preach about God. He not only preached the Gospel of God, but also practised it in his life. He was a preacher and follower of what he preached.

Jesus was in the company of sinners and when the people especially the Sadducees and the Pharisees found fault with him for sitting with the sinners (Luke 5.31). He said that “only the sick needs a physician” (Luke 5.31) and he revealed himself by saying that he “came not for the righteous but for the sinners to repent” (Luke 5.31). When the people could not understand what he taught he often explained to them the meaning of his message in the form of parables. (Luke 5.32) At times, even the disciples could not understand Christ, their master’s teachings and often questioned him. (Matt 13.1-9, Luke 8.4-8) For the purpose of making the educated and the uneducated comprehend the spiritual truth Jesus Christ very meaningfully and effectively exploited the literary strategy of taking recourse to the parabolic method which will drive home the divine message in the form of a simple, easily comprehensible story.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, a godly man and a preacher, who stressed the unity of religions, had the divine inspiration of God. He also was
sent by God to this world to bring about socio-religious harmony and thus bridge the gap between the different religions. He not only tried to bring unity among all religions but also wanted to preach the gospel of God, salvation and the kingdom of God. (TP 162, 182, 263, 266). He paved the path to be followed to attain salvation and reach Brahman.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa is a great parabolist who belonged to the eighteenth century. He hailed from Bengal and experienced poverty in his early life. As a fatherless child he grew up under the tender care of his loving mother. It is his affection towards his mother that made him look upon every woman as his mother. Even though he got married to Sarada Devi he could not take her as his wife (Schiffmann 115). He worshipped her as his godmother and offered flowers to her. He had many women devotees and he saw the divine mother Kali in each one of them. He practised all the religions and realized the truth that “Different paths lead to the same house” (TP 32) just like the different doors that lead to the same house.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa loved children very much and quite frequently he was found in the company of children. Hriday’s\(^1\) son was often with him and from him he learnt many spiritual truths. The five-year old child Shivarajan was with him one day and he was catching grasshopper. When the

\(^1\) A very devoted disciple of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa.
leaves moved he said ‘Hush! Hush!’ and tried to catch the grasshopper. On yet another day the rain was pouring very heavily with thunder and lightning and the child wanted to go out. Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa chided him. But still he would peep now and then and said, “Uncle I see matches striking” (TP 207). From the little words of the child Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa learned great truth and this led Ramakrishna to narrate the parable “The Nature of Paramahamsa” (TP 207) which reveals the spiritual truth that the Paramahamsa is like a five-year-old child who sees everything filled with consciousness.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa had an intuitive realization of God and he is god incarnated with overflowing spiritual knowledge. This spiritual knowledge that he had gained he wanted to impart to the common mob. Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa was thus found with the common people who were illiterate and he wanted to make them understand the divine truth (Chetananda 43). Therefore, like Jesus Christ, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa also made use of the parabolic method to make his listeners grasp the meaning of his message easily.

The parable is basically an artistic medium of instruction, which is not new but an ancient method of teaching. A parable is generally in the form of a
short story bearing a moral or single spiritual truth in it. Emory Stevens
Bucke has defined the parable as “[...] a brief narrative generally used by men
of Biblical times for didactic purposes” (649). The parable is a form used for
didactic or for teaching purposes. Eta Linneman has pointed out that, “The
parables are subject to the laws of popular narrative” (88). Thus it becomes
clear that the parable is always in the form of a narrative bearing a moral in it.

The literary form, be it primary or secondary, is the same in the hands
of the parabolists. But the substance is not the same. The subject matter may
not be and need not be identified. Geriant Vaughan Jones has pointed out: “A
parable is a form of analogy in which form and content are not necessarily
identified” (7). A parable can be used to convey moral, social and spiritual
truths to mankind. Jesus Christ and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, the
reputed parabolists, have deftly used parables with a view to imparting
knowledge about God to the people.

The parabolic method of teaching is not a new form but it had been
used in the Old Testament stories and the Hindu Puranas and the Ramayana
and the Mahabaratha. Both Jesus Christ and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa
were influenced by the parables in the Old Testament and the Indian legends
respectively. In the case of Jesus Christ, one ought to bear in mind that the
parables as designed in the Bible developed from the gnomic saying of the
wisdom teachers. In course of time, however, it developed into parabolic sayings, then as narrative parables and finally it took its remarkably consummate shape and form in the hands of the parabolist Jesus Christ.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa was also well versed in the Hindu scriptures as well as the Bible and he must have been influenced by the stories in the Puranas and in the Bible. Thus, in a way, the parables of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa are recreations of the stories of the Puranas and the grand old epics of India the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha (Abhedananda 52). He has also meticulously followed the method employed by Jesus Christ in narrating the parables.

Emory Stevens Bucke has poignantly highlighted the aims and purpose of the parabolic method (650). That which renders a parabolic saying more compact and comprehensive is the inherent provision and the in-built mechanism of vivid illustrative examples for teaching and the parable may derive itself from the tendency towards parallelism in gnomic utterances. Parabolic saying is illustrative and dependent upon ‘association’ with another statement for clarification of its significance, while the gnomic saying is independent of moral maxims (Bucke 650). In the Old Testament times
gnomic sayings were used to express moral truths. But it is evident that the parables used by Jesus Christ reveal more spiritual truth than moral truth.

Jesus Christ and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa used not only parables but also similitudes and allegories. Fables, in addition, were also used by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. An allegory is a development or a symbolic extension of a parable. The parable reveals the truth but an allegory conceals the truth. An allegory is in the form of a parable but with symbols to represent a particular truth. The allegories used by Jesus Christ are very few and only a few parables like “The Sower and the Seed” (Matt. 13.1-9, Mark 4.1-9, Luke 8.4-8) can be taken as an allegory where the interpretation is given by Jesus Christ himself. The other parables “The Wheat and the Tares” (Matt 13.24-30, Mark 4.26-39) and “The Ten Virgins” (Matt 25.1-13) can be, in the loose sense of the term, taken as allegories too. But they are interpreted by other critics and exegetic commentators in various other ways as well.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa has used parables with symbolic representations. But in the case of almost all the allegories the interpretations are given by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, the preacher himself (Sen 34). Even though he uses Sanskrit words or expressions, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa has given suitable explanations too in such a way that a
reader/listener could understand the spiritual truth without unnecessarily taxing his brain or straining his nerves.

Jesus Christ and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa used similitudes or comparison like the parables to reveal the spiritual truth. Each and every object they saw took the shape of a similitude. Similitude is part and parcel of their teaching. Every object of nature spoke to them the spiritual truth. Jesus Christ took the material from the real life and the nature around him. He used mustard seed, pearl, leaven, coin, wheat, salt, light and seeds to convincingly bring home his message of God (Matt 13.31-32, Mark 4.30-32, Luke 13.18,19; Matt 13.45; Matt 13.31-32, Luke 30.20,21; Luke 15.8-10; Matt 13.24-30, Mark 4.26-29; Matt 5.13-16; Matt 13.1-9, Mark 4.1-9, Luke 8.4-8). Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa also saw spiritual truth even in the trivial objects of nature. He used gold, loincloth, toad, and elephant (TP 18, 44, 255, 46) to impart the divine truth, understanding of which is made clearer and easier by the familiarity and proximity of the objects used. A reader/listener was aware of the material used by Jesus Christ and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and so they could easily grasp the truth in it.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa used fables, in addition, for the very same purpose for which he used the parables (TP 132, 170, 216). A fable is
also in the form of a short story with animals as characters and they speak out the truth. A fable is generally defined as a form of didactic narrative in which plants or animals think, speak, and behave as people do. The fable bears close resemblance to allegory and parable, insofar as they are conceived as the actors of the ‘event’ and thus what they perform becomes the common underlying factor. But nevertheless they remain distinct from the characters, who are the narrator’s real concern and the distinctness is also maintained in their actions. Strangely enough, the reader or the listener knows the difference, draws the parable as a parable and the fable as a fable, and discerns the moral. But basically what distinguishes the fable from the other forms is the human behaviour in it of trees and beasts, inanimate nature (Emory Stevens Bucke 221).

What was remarkable about Jesus Christ and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa is that they both were keen observers of nature and the lives of the common man as they saw around them. And they have so very artistically used them in the form of a parable or fable, as the case may be, making the truth more realistic with easily comprehensible descriptions. This obviously resulted in the spontaneous overflow of their powerful creative imaginations that took the form of parables, encapsulating inimitable tales and stories, which are indeed the outcome of their intimation with God and nature.
1.2. Review of Literature

There are not many full-length or area-specific comparative or cross-cultural studies of the parables of Jesus Christ and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. A review of the relevant literatures available on Jesus Christ and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, as related to their parables is, therefore, attempted individually, but separately for Jesus Christ and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. At the end, however, is given the review of the few comparative studies available on the parables of Jesus Christ and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa.

The New English Dictionary on Historical Principles (1919) gives a clear picture of the term 'parable' and its development. It also documents chronologically the use of the word parable in the English language by writers of various schools of thought. Brewer Cobbant’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fables (1923) throws fresh light upon the meaning of the term fable, its etymology and its development. Cobbant’s Dictionary looks at fables from a literary viewpoint, even as it provides an account of the various types of fables.
The Parables of Jesus by Battrick George (1928) discusses in detail the parabolic method and the various parables with interpretation and commentaries. The Parables of our Saviour by William M. Taylor (1929) chiefly focuses on the parables “The Prodigal Son”, “The Elder Brother”, “The Prudent Steward”, “The Rich Man and Lazarus” and also their interpretations. Taylor’s perceptive analysis of the parables shows the rigour and precision with which Jesus Christ handled the parabolic medium in his preaching.

John Hargrieve’s Guide to the Parables (1939) paves the way for the readers to undertake a deep study and understanding of the parables of Jesus Christ. It also provides the multidimensional structure of a parable in the overall context of the socio-cultural and religio-theological reality that accounted for the parabolic preaching.

The Parables of the Kingdom by C.H. Dodd (1952) offers an excellent clue to the readers on the mystery of the kingdom of God as revealed in the parables. Dodd also demonstrates how Jesus Christ had put the parable-strategy to the best possible use in expounding the meaning of the kingdom of God in simple, layman’s language.
The Parables of the Gospels and their Meaning Today by Hugh Martin (1957) attempts a definition of the parable, and shows how the parables should be interpreted. This serves as a very objective interpreter’s guide to the parables of Jesus Christ. Martin, through his incisive analysis, draws the attention of the readers to the contemporary relevance of the parables.

Understanding the Parables by Francis N. Filas (1959) exhaustively catalogues all the meanings which can be found in and which can be attributed to the word ‘parable’. What is refreshingly original about Filas’ study is that it looks at the parables of Christ from a reader’s perspective, employing the critical tools of the reader-response theories.

A.M. Hunter's *Interpreting the Parables* (1960) attempts to show the reader how modern scholars understand the parables of Jesus. It also tries to sketch the history of interpretation from apostolic times until today and to suggest how parables, originally addressed to a specific historical situation in *parabolae*, one thousand nine hundred years ago, can still speak in the twentieth century.

The *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* by Emory Stevens Bucke (1962), perhaps the monumental achievement in recent times in theological and exegetic interpretations and commentaries on all the books of the Bible, brings out vividly the etymology of the term ‘parable’, and its development from the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament*. It also provides deeper socio-spiritual insights into every parable of Jesus Christ fixing it in its definite socio-historical context, even as it demonstrates how the parables also transcend the temporal and spiritual reality and become universally relevant and acceptable for all times and for all ages.

*Proclaiming the Parables* by William J. Danker (1963) points out that proclamation involves a message and a mission. This book throws light upon the term parable and it also provides the general framework for developing an appreciation of the parables of Jesus Christ as a primary instrument for proclaiming the kingdom of God.
Geriant Vaughan Jones in *The Art and Truth of the Parables* (1964) extensively discusses the nature of the parabolic method, and presents the method as a fine expression of a form of art with the religio-artistic truth figuratively enmeshed in it. Jones’ study views the parables primarily as an art form and argues that the parable is fundamentally a literary genre in itself. Geriant Vaughan Jones also points out clearly the difference between a parable and an allegory. According to him, “A parable is a form of analogy in which form and content are not necessarily identified” (7) and “All parables unaccompanied by explanation should be considered as an allegory” (6). Perhaps his greatest contribution to the study of parables is his impressive delineation of the characteristic features of a parable.

Eta Linnemann’s *Parables of Jesus* (1966) is an earnest attempt to study the latent meanings of the parabolic method, the parables of Jesus Christ and how far the parable has been a successful vehicle in the hands of a preacher like Jesus Christ in unravelling divine mysteries. Eta Linnemann lays down the three laws of similitude. Parable is defined as a form of argument. The narrator brings the reality into language by his assertion of the correspondence between the material of the parable and the reality, and so opens up the possibility of understanding it (25).
As the *Harper's Study Bible* by Harold Lyndsell (1966) clearly points out "The Bible can serve its function in the modern world only if it is understood" (13). To understand the parables of Jesus Christ, therefore, one needs a basic understanding of the books that present the parables of Jesus Christ. The *Harper's Study Bible* defines parable as "[...] an earthly story with a heavenly meaning" (14). The *Harper's Study Bible* shows how spiritual truth is unfolded in everyday language using ordinary figures of speech. The details of parables should not be presented beyond the principal object of the compositors. Each parable has a main point and was spoken to make that point easily apparent. The *Harper's Study Bible* provides very clearly the introductory notes for the definition of parables and offers enough information on the parables and the parabolist Jesus Christ.

Edward A. Armstrong, in *The Gospel Parables* (1967), Brown Reynold in *The Jerome Bible* (1968), Jeremiah Joachim in *The Parables of Jesus* (1972), Black Matthew in the *Parables Commentary on the Bible* (1975) and Gaebelein Frank in *The Expositor's Bible* (1984) try to interpret the parables of Jesus from a refreshingly clearer Christian theological viewpoint. These studies, thus, throw more light on the Christian message that the parables choose to convey than on the form, function and technique of the parables as viewed by a literary critic in explicating the profound messages contained in the parables.
D.J. A Clines (1981) and John Gotient (1982) in their articles “A New Thesis” and “The Bible as Literature” view the parables from the literary perspective and try to show the great success achieved by Jesus Christ in exploiting the parabolic medium for teaching and instruction.

In *Parables and Fables for Modern Man* by Peter Ribbes (1984) the parabolic method is examined from a theological perspective. He points out that the parables of Jesus Christ are ever old and ever new. They speak to man in the depth of his being. Peter Ribbes has also shown how a parable should be used to impart spiritual truth and how Jesus Christ has utilized this method to convey the divine truth. The parables, in this book, are classified into three categories of values, the religious values, the social values and the personal values.

Guthrie in the *New Bible Commentary* (1990) offers well-graded substantive exegetical commentary on all parables of Jesus Christ with of course the inevitable central thrust on the religious element in the parables. Guthrie’s study offers insightful clues to a thematological categorization of the parables as well.

Ronald and Murphy (1994) in their scholarly paper “Wisdom Literature and Biblical Theology” offers a perspective analysis of the parabolist
exclusive-specific and parabolic-periphery themes dealt with by Jesus Christ. Ronald and Murphy relate the effective use of the literary device to a meaningful exposition of the theological categories in Christ’s parables.

_The Life of Ramakrishna_ by Romain Rolland (1929) gives a sympathetic account of the life of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, his disciples and the circumstances which led him to live a holy life, preaching the Gospel of the kingdom of God and how he upheld in word and deed the concept of the unity of religions. Romain Rolland’s study helps to understand some of the basic themes dealt with by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa in his parables.

Romain Rolland in his study brings out the definition of the character of the Absolute: “The Absolute is without attachment to the good as well as the evil” (204). The book also focuses on the incarnations of God – the Buddha, Krishna, Jesus and Ramakrishna are all incarnations of God or the Absolute. The Absolute cannot be known but the incarnations of God reveal God to man. This study also treats the spiritually glorious event (moment) of transfiguration in a newer light. The transfiguration of Jesus Christ along with those of St. Peter and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa with his disciple Hirday is presented in the right comparative perspective. Transfiguration is explained
as the pure light and transformation is possible only if the pure light has taken on a familiar form and then again become pure light.

_Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda_ by Geoffrey Camberlege (1951) attempts a study of the view of God (Brahman) as perceived by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and his disciple Swami Vivekananda. This book also discusses the various parables used by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa in the context of defining the theological notion of God-head as conceived by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa.

Swami Ghananda (1970) in his _Sri Ramakrishna and his Unique Message_ looks at the parables of Ramakrishna as the very nucleus of the carrier of the message of Ramakrishna. His study attempts a detailed theme by theme analysis of Ramakrishna’s parables and shows how the parabolic expositions form an integral part of the uniqueness of Ramakrishna’s message.

_The Parables of Sri Ramakrishna_ by Swami Abhedananda (1986) is an objective, thorough and deep critical study of the various parables of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. In particular, Abhedananda’s study centers around the orient-specific themes such as transfiguration and _maya_, incarnation and _yoga_, so very uniquely expounded by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa in his homilies and religious discourses.
A.P. Serebbiany's *Tolstoy and Sri Ramakrishna* (1987) provides deeper insights into the message of love and universal brotherhood preached by Tolstoy and Sri Ramakrishna. This comparative study sharply takes into account the fact that the 'story value' – based on the parables of Ramakrishna and the stories of Tolstoy – is the central focus of Tolstoy and Ramakrishna in giving artistic form and shape to their message.

Richard Schiffman (1989) in his study mainly focuses on the prophetic components of the parable, that is, how Ramakrishna has been able to offer an apocalyptic vision using the simple literary device of the parable. Swami Chetananda (1990) in *Ramakrishna as We Saw Him* presents a bird's eye view of the parabolic teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and tries to fix the parables and their relevance in the overall context of Ramakrishna's mission on earth.

Karnadikar in his *Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda* (1991) traces the evolution of the parabolic exposition in Ramakrishna's preaching and the extent to which Swamy Vivekananda was influenced by the parabolic method. Karnadikar also attempts to show how Ramakrishna's parabolic expositions was the beginning of the neo-vedantic understanding of the ancient scriptures.

There are, however, only a few comparative studies that are devoted to an analytic interpretation of the major motifs and themes one finds in the
parables of Jesus Christ and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. But these studies basically focus on the parabolist-exclusive-specific areas and subjects explicated by these two eminent parabolists.

James Rajendra’s *Anatomy of Yoga and the Christian Faith* (1994) attempts an understanding of the importance of yoga from the Christian perspective. It also highlights the differences in the perceptions about yoga as related to Christian faith. But then, this study helps to correlate the theme of yoga as expounded by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa in his parables and fables with its possible near equivalents, although at times farfetched, in the parabolic teachings of Christ.

*Ramakrishna and Christ* by Hans Torweston (1999) is perhaps the only full-length comparative study of the parables of Jesus Christ and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. But the comparative discussions centre more around the religio-theological stance of these two great men of God than on the literary and the thematological-formalistic aspects of the parables as an artistic instrument or an interpretative story-capsule that would make the process of listening and understanding not an exercise in faceless indifference and futility but an involvement in appreciative revival and regeneration.