The thought of John Paul II on women and the family is consistent with the tradition of relational feminism. Often overlooked in discussions of his thinking are themes that reflect this tradition: participation of women in public life; affirmation of the distinctive capacities and contributions of women; interdependence and solidarity of men and women; and, the need for social and economic practices that will enable women and men to participate in public life while protecting and promoting the good of families.

Many of Pope John Paul II’s writings deal in some way with women and the family. A legitimate question may be whether it is meaningful to speak of a “feminist component” to his thought in this area. As is well known, John Paul has made a plea for the development of a “new feminism” in his Encyclical Letter Evangelium Vitae, and recent visitors to the Vatican report that in private audiences, he has taken to calling himself “il Papa feminista” - the feminist Pope. This title may sound odd to most ears, feminist and non-feminist alike. Surely John Paul is far more renowned for his defense of the so-called “traditional family” — an ideal of the family defined in terms of heterosexual marriage and gender-specific roles (not to mention his opposition to abortion, and to the inclusion of women in the priesthood). Just as surely, contemporary American feminism views such conceptualizations of the family as incompatible with any feminist agenda.

Is there any sense then in using the term “feminist” to characterize John Paul’s writings on women and the family? The term is useful and not only because John Paul employs it himself. It is useful first of all, because there are sound historical reasons for locating John Paul writings on women and the family in a feminist framework. Secondly, an historically clarified feminist hermeneutic can serve to illuminate directions in John Paul’s thought which point the way to significant developments in Catholic social teaching.

In effect, argument can be made for a more historically sensitive, complex and inclusive understanding of feminism, and in doing so, use can be made of
it as a lens for picking out distinctive emphases and directions in John Paul’s thought regarding women and the family.

First it is necessary to sketch briefly a more comprehensive notion of feminism. Basically this task requires movement beyond the prevailing, post-1960s model of feminist discourse in the United States today and consideration into both earlier American and earlier European models. Useful in this regard are the categories developed by the historian Karen Offen in her groundbreaking article “Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach”.

Relational and Individualist Modes of Feminist Discourse

Based on comparative historical studies of the women’s movements in Europe and the United States, Offen makes a strong case for the development of a “more dynamic, more supple, and more comprehensive” conceptualization of feminism. Minimally, this conceptualization should be expansive enough to incorporate two distinct forms of feminist argument or discourse which Offen identifies with the terms “relational” and “individualist.” Broadly speaking, relational arguments have predominated in the history of European feminism and with modifications, continue to do so. The American story is somewhat more complex. While there has always been an individualist strain in American feminism, relational arguments were nonetheless common in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is only in post 1960s American feminism that individualist discourse has come to dominate. Since this is the period in which histories of the women’s movement began to be written, that history has largely assumed that individualist discourse is synonymous with feminism itself. Offen’s point is that feminists employed both relational and individualist models, and an expansive definition of feminism should include both.

Briefly stated, individualist discourse emphasized the quest for personal independence, autonomy and self-realization in all aspects of life and asserted that this quest is as much the prerogative of women as it has been for men. In its robust forms, the individualist mode of argument assumes that the individual, irrespective of gender, social roles or social location, is the bearer of rights and the foundational unit of society. Consequently, feminists working in this framework focused their energies and their language on the achievement of complete equality of rights, responsibilities, and privileges in both public and private life. Socially defined roles, especially childbearing and its attendant responsibilities, only function to restrict individuals, women particularly. Thus, the family, defined in terms of heterosexual marriage and gender specific roles, must be deconstructed in order to free individuals, principally women, to realize their full potential.

In contrast, the relational mode of argument emphasized the distinctiveness of the feminine and underscored the importance of women’s unique contributions to society. Typically, the “distinctively feminine” was defined in
terms of biologically and culturally rooted capacities and roles centering primarily on motherhood. According to this mode of reasoning, the empowerment of women required greater social and political emphasis on the maternal role, not a lessening of it.9

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, feminists working in the relational model commonly contextualized their claims to women’s rights (economic, social and political) within a framework which assumed the “necessary complementarity of, distinction between and interdependence of the sexes.”10 In other words, the argument was for women’s rights precisely as women, i.e., in virtue of their distinctive contributions, not in spite of them, and in their relation to men, and therefore not as abstracted individuals.

Significantly, the relational mode of argument posited the companionate, non-hierarchical male-female couple as the basic unit of society rather than the individual. In this view, the patriarchal family needed to be reformed, beginning with a reconceptualization of marriage as a non-hierarchical, companionate union. However, the family itself (mother, father, children) remained foundational to the social order. Rather than “seeking unqualified admission to male-dominated society,” feminists working in this model mounted wide-ranging critiques of society and its institutions.11 Typically, they criticized the existing social order as overly masculine in emphasis and therefore inhospitable to the contributions of women and the claims of the family.

In summary, relational discourse situates the rights of individuals--both men and women--within various social units beginning with the family and extending to the broader, national community. Feminists working within the relational model typically focused their efforts on the reform of these social units and their interrelation, whereas those in the individualist model focused on rights for individuals over against the claims of social units, particularly the family.

**Feminist Discourse in the Thought of John Paul II**

With this broader conceptualization of feminism in mind, it is not difficult to find evidence of what could be called a “feminist consciousness” in John Paul’s social thought:12 he endorses the women’s movement, and while granting excesses, insists that the “unfinished journey” of “the great process of women’s liberation” must go on; 13 he is keenly aware of and strongly condemns various forms of discrimination, domination and marginalization affecting women;14 he acknowledges that history has been written from a largely masculine perspective and must be “rewritten” to incorporate women’s contributions;15 he seemingly criticizes contemporary culture as excessively masculine and in need of a feminine corrective;16 and he calls for a “culture of equality” in which “real equality” has been achieved in every area--familial, economic, social, political and cultural.17
John Paul’s emphatic insistence on equality of rights and dignity and his emphasis on personal self-actualization certainly addresses the primary concerns of the individualist model of feminism. Yet the encompassing conceptual framework is relational. This is evident first of all in his concept of the human person. For John Paul, the person is by nature a relational being called to participate in the building and sustaining of community. Personal self-actualization only comes about through interpersonal relations. Thus, rights are rights of persons with respect to other persons; and participation is not only a right and a responsibility, but an exigency of human nature. To deny women rights to participation in the community is to deny them the context for their full actualization as persons.

The relational character of his thought is also evident in his concept of society: assuming the complementarity, distinction and interdependence of the sexes, John Paul insists that the health and vibrancy of society depends upon the mutual cooperation and interdependence of women and men in both the family and public life. Thus, women’s participation in public life is not only a question of justice for women, but a question of promoting the common good of society as a whole.

For John Paul, a “culture of equality” is not one which works to minimize differences between women and men as on the individualist model; rather, it is one which recognizes and welcomes the original contributions of women (what John Paul II calls “the feminine genius”) in both family life and public life. In a way similar to relational arguments, John Paul primarily uses the language of maternity to distinguish what is original to women. However, while the concept of maternity serves to identify the distinctively feminine, the Pope’s use of the concept does not function to restrict women to the sphere of the family: rather, on his view, a culture of equality would work to increase both the public recognition and support of women’s contributions in the family, and women’s participation in all aspects of social life.

Looking to John Paul’s specific writings on the family, themes familiar in relational feminist arguments again emerge. He insists that the contributions of mothers to the common good be recognized and supported—culturally, socially, politically and economically—and that social and economic practices be reformed in ways that make this recognition practical and effective.

At the same time, he insists that women’s participation in public life be increased and encouraged. Thus, John Paul II does not place women’s participation in family life and their participation in public life in stark opposition, though he clearly prioritizes motherhood. This prioritizing means that in balancing the demands of both, the maternal care of children must be effectively promoted and protected. Nonetheless, he does not pose this prioritizing in individualist terms, i.e., simply as the individual woman’s responsibility and burden. For John Paul, the responsibilities of fathers must be reinforced, and more fundamentally, society itself—based on the principle of
subsidiarity—should be organized in such a way that women and men are enabled to meet their obligations to their families. A somewhat lengthy quote illustrates his views:

Profound changes are needed in attitudes and [the] organization of society in order to facilitate the participation of women in public life, while at the same time providing for the special obligations of women and men with regard to their families.... The challenge facing most societies today is that of upholding, indeed strengthening, women’s role in the family while at the same time making it possible for her to use all her talents and exercise all her rights in building up society. However, women’s greater presence in the work force, public life, and generally in the decision making processes guiding society, on an equal basis with men, will continue to be problematic as long as the costs continue to burden the private sector. In this area the state has the duty of subsidiarity, to be exercised through suitable legislative and social security initiatives. In the perspective of uncontrolled free-market policies there is little hope that women will be able to overcome the obstacles in their path.

So, is John Paul II a feminist? If we grant Offen’s comprehensive conceptualization of feminism, then his social thought on women and the family is clearly consistent with the tradition of relational feminism. More importantly, such a conceptualization of feminism serves to highlight dimensions of John Paul’s thought which are otherwise easily overlooked and which deserve further development: his strong commitment to the participation of women in public life; his emphasis on the empowerment of women through the affirmation of their distinctive capacities and contributions; his confirmation of the interdependence and solidarity of women and men in both the family and the broader community; his call for effective reforms of social and economic practice to enable women and men to participate in public life while at the same time protecting and promoting the good of families.

Of course, a feminist hermeneutic is neither the sole nor the primary lens through which to view John Paul II’s social thought. Perhaps rather than calling John Paul a feminist it would be more precise to say that there are clear feminist dimensions to his social concerns which arise from a distinct vision of the individual person and the community. These feminist dimensions deserve further development. The challenge in the American context is whether this vision can have practical relevance given our individualist assumptions.

Notes


2. Because of constraints of time and space, discussions of both abortion and the priesthood are excluded, while granting that a full treatment of the feminist dimensions
of John Paul’s thought would have to include both. Regarding abortion, it should be noted that the majority of nineteenth and early twentieth century women activists opposed abortion as incompatible with their feminism. Even today there is a small but principled feminist pro-life voice. See e.g., Rachel McNair, Mare Krane Derr, and Linda Naranjo-Huebl, eds., Pro-Life Feminism Yesterday and Today (New York: Sulzburger and Graham Publishing 1995); and Angela Kennedy, ed., Swimming Against the Tide: Feminist Dissent on the Issue of Abortion (Dublin: Open Air, 1997).

In contrast to the issue of abortion, the Catholic Church’s position on an exclusively male priesthood is far more difficult to defend from within a feminist perspective. Nonetheless, it is both possible and necessary to articulate the theology of the priesthood in a way which is not incompatible with an affirmation of the rights of women and a commitment to women’s participation in society and the Church. In this regard, see S. Butler "Women’s Ordination and the Development of Doctrine," The Thomist 61, no. 4 (1997): 501-524.


5. Ibid., 120.


8. Offen, 136. Feminists working in the individualist mode typically assume that generalizable sex and gender differences are socially constructed and malleable, and in any case, ought to be irrelevant ethically, socially and politically.


12. Preference is primarily to his various writings at the time of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. See especially his "Letter to Women" (hereafter, "Letter") "Welcome to Gertrude Mongella" (hereafter "Welcome"), and his various
"Angelus" remarks. These have been collected in *The Genius Of Women* NCCB (publication no. 5-113: 1997).


18. Or as some would prefer, "communitarian" conceptual framework. See, e.g., D. Hollenbach's, "A Communitarian Reconstruction of Human Rights: Contributions from Catholic Tradition" in R. B. Douglass and D. Hollenbach, eds., *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy*. Also, Jean Bethke Elshtain makes the point well in speaking about Catholic social thought generally: "Catholic social thought does not offer a 'third way, as if it were simply a matter of hacking off bits and pieces of the individualist-collectivist options and melding them into a palatable compromise. Rather, it begins from a fundamentally different ontology from that assumed and required by individualism, on the one hand, and statist collectivism, on the other. The assumptions of Catholic social thought provide for individuality and rights as the goods of persons in community, together with the claims of social obligation." J. Elshtain, "Catholic Social Thought, The City, and Liberal America" in R. B. Douglass and D. Hollenbach, eds., *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy*.

19. More specifically, it is through the *giving of oneself* that the person truly actualizes himself or herself. In making this point John Paul repeatedly refers to *Gaudium et Spes*, 22: "The human being is the only creature willed for his own sake. Yet he can only find himself through a sincere gift of self".

20. The philosophical roots here are a combination of neo-scholastic metaphysics (Thomism), phenomenological anthropology (Scheler), and personalist social thought (Scheler, Mounier and Maritain). It is personalism in particular which functions as a corrective to liberal individualism. For the most important collection of texts in English, see *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, T. Sandok, trans., (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

21. In John Paul II's writings, maternity is emblematic of the distinctively feminine, and it finds expression not only in the family and in such care-directed professions as health care and education, but in any context where human relations are given priority. The concept is not restrictive: it does not refer exclusively to literal, biologically based maternity nor does it function to restrict women to certain spheres. Maternity is, rather, an expansive concept which seems to incorporate attitudes and virtues associated with...
the care and nurture of persons and it can find expression in all areas of human interaction. If anything, argument can be made that John Paul's use of the term is too expansive (rather than restrictive); it seems at times to encompass basic "personalist" attitudes and virtues which are not unique to women, and at other times simply to function as a synonym for the feminine.

It is also worth noting the varying similarities/divergences between John Paul's use of the 'maternal' and descriptions of the feminine developed in e.g., Nel Noddings, *The Ethics of Care: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Nancy Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) and Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1993).


23. In language strikingly similar to 19th century relational arguments, John Paul states that in the vocation of motherhood women assume "almost a foundational role with regard to society. It is a role she shares with her husband but it is indisputable that nature has assigned to her the greater part."


25. A typical and largely valid feminist criticism points out the disproportionate emphasis placed on women's responsibility in the family in contrast to men's responsibilities. John Paul II does refer to the correlation between the responsibilities of mothers and fathers (see, e.g., *Familiaris Consortio*, 25 ; "World Day of Peace Message," 1995: 6; and "Welcome") but generally the contextualization of men's rights and responsibilities in relation to the family is not consistent.


27. Mary Ann Glendon offers a good statement of the more practical dimensions of John Paul's feminism in her "The Pope's New Feminism," *Crisis* 15 (March 1997): 28-31; For a helpful overview of the contributions of Catholic social teaching regarding the family, see Laura Gellott, "The Family, Liberalism, and Catholic Social Teaching" in R. B. Douglass and D. Hollenbach, eds., *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy*. There are more resources in the thought of John Paul than Gellot identifies.