It has been customary to characterize Christian-Muslim relations in East Africa as relatively harmonious, compared to other areas in the world (including West Africa). However, during the past decade, there appears to be a current of increasing polarization in the reports that reach us. How significant this current is, though, remains to be seen.

This article seeks to make an inventory and analyze the major trends that emerge from such reports. As a point of reference, we will take the articles that have appeared on this subject in some East African theological periodicals. These will be complemented with some other periodicals, especially the Saudi-Arabian Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs (JIMMA), where the Muslim voice is strongly represented.

The reason for concentrating upon journal articles is, that they can be considered to reflect more directly on recent developments. This becomes apparent when we see that the most recent monograph on this topic, Rasmussen (1993), is based upon research carried out back in 1980. The second most recent would be Westerlund (1980). Both thus reflect a period during which the religious communities were strongly urged by the government to cooperate for the development of the country, in line with the ujamaa philosophy of president Julius Nyerere. Neither can be expected to shed much light on developments after Nyerere’s retirement and the gradual departure from ujamaa assumptions, which constitute the background to the articles discussed here.

There is an additional interesting aspect to the picture that emerges from these articles. On the one hand, as they are usually produced within a relatively short period of time, they cannot be expected to express a very deliberate judgment. On the other, as each of them is produced and
read primarily by members of the same community, they contribute more to the internal creation of an image than to an open debate between the respective groups (Christians and Muslims, but also the various branches of both). In the worst case, this could imply that first-sight impressions or even mere gossip may pass without any correction, thus adding to what inclination there may already be towards distrust of the other. In other words, the articles may become themselves a factor contributing to the sphere of polarization they intend to describe.

Reason enough, it seems, for a critical comparison of the views expressed by authors from the various communities. For this purpose, a number of aspects will be discussed successively, such as to get a good view of the differences and conflicts existing in each of these aspects. First however, a short characteristic will be given of the periodicals involved.

1a Roman Catholic Periodicals Quoted

The oldest theological periodical in East Africa is presumably the quarterly AFER (African Ecclesial Review), which has been published since 1959 first in Uganda, then in Eldoret, Kenya, on behalf of AMECEA, a cooperative institute of the Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa. It aims to provide some theological background for pastoral work in an African context; the role played by Christian-Muslim relations, however, is rather small.

More systematic reflection is offered by another quarterly, C.U.E.A. African Christian Studies, which was first published in 1985 at the Catholic University (then still called Higher Institute) of East Africa in Nairobi, which is also an AMECEA institution. It is very much concerned with the inculturation of Christianity within African traditional culture, but not so much with the encounter with Islam which is taking place at the same time. An exception is the contribution by the Department of History of Christianity to the first C.U.E.A. theological week in 1994 on 'Evangelization as Dialogue' (to be referred to as C.U.E.A. 1994).

Spearhead, again by AMECEA from Eldoret, is a series of papers on numerous (pastoral) subjects from various sources, appearing five times a year. The issues on Christian-Muslim understanding (Spearhead 1986) were originally published in French by C.E.R.A.O., the regional episcopal conference of Francophone West Africa, but there is an additional chapter on the history of Islam in East Africa by Islam expert Justo Lacunza Balda.

Since 1973, AMECEA also has a two-weekly newsletter-like publication called AMECEA Documentation Service. It used to consist of short reports, statements, etc., but recently, some more elaborated reports have appeared, among them Schonecke (1996).