The 'golden age' that was al-Andalus, medieval Andalucia, has become a byword for cultural and intellectual flowering in an environment of religious and ethnic tolerance. At a time when the students of the late Samuel Huntington try to tell us that civilisations are by definition destined to clash, Muslim Spain and even some of the Christian kingdoms that immediately followed it – such as that of Alfonso X, 'The Learned' – have become emblems of a more hopeful view of the human spirit and the capacity for creative co-existence to win out over closed minds.

The idyllic images of Andalucia are to some extent, of course, the product of wishful thinking. Jews were permitted more freedom in Spain's Islamic kingdoms than in bigoted Christian Europe and in some cases occupied positions of power and influence. But there were also pogroms and anti-Jewish violence which in some cases killed thousands. In 1066, anti-Jewish riots in Granada killed, amongst others, the son of the city's vizier. The Caliphate of Cordoba saw a spectacular flowering of architectural and artistic virtuosity, especially in the great Umayyad palace, the Madinat as-Zahra, but the Madinat itself was destroyed within decades of its construction during fighting between Berber invaders and the local population. For most of its history, Andalucia was not a single unified political entity, but a network of small city-states and petty kingdoms or taifas. Often these were at war against each other, and thought nothing of allying with local Christian kings or mercenaries (including 'El Cid,' the famous Spanish knight of Hollywood fame, whose title is a corruption of the Arabic el Sayyid, 'Lord') against Muslim neighbours.

Despite the need to temper some of the myths with a little cold reality, it is still vitally important to recognise the significance of this period. In some ways, Andalucia's importance was as a cultural rather than a specifically religious entity, a mosaic of political units with, to varying extents, a common ethos of tolerance, love of learning, support for artistic and literary excellence and an ability to look beyond the depressingly parochial world-views which characterised many Christian rulers in medieval Europe. It was in Andalucia that some of the great classical texts were saved by Arab and Jewish scholars. And it was Andalucia which gave the world such great philosophers and poets as Ibn Rushd/Averroes, Maimonides/Rambam, Ibn Tufail and Judah Halevi.
Matthew Carr's book begins where this slightly tarnished Golden Age ended, not with a grand defeat but with centuries of attrition, including a period of 250 years when Granada was an isolated Islamic outpost, centred on the glorious Nasrid palace of the Alhambra. The Nasrids were vassals of the Christian kings of Castile and often collaborated with them to suppress Muslim rebels, but they maintained some of the artistic and scholarly spirit of al-Andalus' glory days. And as well as the last Muslim kingdom, 'Mudejar' Muslims, practicing their own faith and protected by treaties, for four hundred years formed substantial communities throughout Andalucia, Valencia and other parts of Spain.

But in 1492 the husband-and-wife team Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon completed the so-called 'reconquista' or Christian Reconquest of Spain. Contemporary – and sometimes modern – propaganda portrayed this as the return of Spain to its natural position as a Christian state, although many of the earlier Christian 're'conquests were not necessarily driven by religious zeal, but were part of local skirmishing which was far more pragmatic than ideological. And, of course, some areas of Southern Spain had been Muslim for at least as long as they had been Christian before the Umayyad conquest, and many of those Muslim inhabitants were the descendants of converts – willing or forced – and had family roots in Spain as long as those of any Christian. But Ferdinand and Isabella were keen to attract Papal blessings and, in Isabella's case, were gripped by genuine religious fanaticism and belief in the proto-racist doctrine of 'limpieza de sangre' – 'clean blood' – whereby Spain's ruling classes endeavoured to prove themselves free of Moorish or Jewish 'taint'.

In the same year, the Catholic Kings applied themselves not only to removing the last Muslim rulers of Spain, but also to 'cleansing' their kingdoms of their Jewish population. In a foretaste of the fate of Spain's Muslims, Jews were given minimal notice to wind up their affairs and were forbidden to take many of their assets with them so that, in a glutted market, they received a tiny proportion of the true worth of their valuables. Many were also charged outrageous rates for the 'privilege' of being transported from their own homes.

Ten years later, Ferdinand broke earlier treaties and declared that the Mudejar Muslims also had to leave Spain – again under disadvantageous economic terms – or convert to Christianity. Following any religion but Catholic Christianity was now a crime. This was the start of a century of persecution, during which the population now known as 'Moriscos' were treated with growing suspicion and discrimination by the Catholic authorities. The notorious Spanish Inquisition, which had been founded to hunt down Jews, turned its attention to Morisco converts, forcing some to eat pork or drink alcohol to prove that they had genuinely converted. Suspicious behaviour, which could result in being denounced to the Inquisition, including washing. Punishment for minor infringements of this new religious stringency could
include lashes or fines; the most serious 'offences' attracted the death penalty. And in the course of the sixteenth century, several Muslim uprisings in Andalucia and Valencia were put down with astonishing military savagery.

Alongside this rise in religious persecution came decades of dithering on the part of the Spanish monarchs over whether or not to simply end matters by expelling any populations where Islam was thought to still be existing 'underground.' Some advisors to the various kings happily advocated forcing thousands of Moriscos into boats and letting them drift, to starve on the sea. This, according to some theologians, would not be actually killing people, but simply allowing them to die, and was not, therefore, a sin. Many voices argued against – from the landowners of large parts of Southern Spain, who feared that they would lose the bulk of their workforce, to priests who asserted that mass expulsions would be inhumane and that it was the duty of Catholics to ensure that Morisco souls were saved by ensuring that they were properly converted to Christianity.

Despite these dissenting voices, between 1609 and 1614 Philip III of Spain finally decided to expel the Moriscos. 350,000 people were forced from their homes and, like the Jews, were often prevented from properly liquidating their assets and were then charged large sums for 'safe' passage to North Africa or the Eastern Mediterranean. Tens of thousands died on the way, killed by ship-owners who robbed families and threw them into the sea or simply succumbing to exhaustion and the lack of food and water supplied en route. Many were also killed when they reached North Africa by nomadic bands who, again, robbed the hapless refugees.

In his meticulous tracing of these events Carr doesn't claim to be unearthing new material and relies on documentary evidence which, in some cases, is widely available. In its linear narrative of the policies and battles of various kings, nobles and clergy, parts of the book can feel like a history crib-sheet of dates and names. But it comes alive when Carr works in detail from Inquisition records and personal writings such as diaries and memoirs. He evokes the effects of these great affairs of state on ordinary residents of sixteenth century Spain, living under increasing persecution and then driven from their homes, often separated from their families and stripped of their possessions. These episodes, conveyed down the centuries, are often deeply moving.

This book is also important on a grander scale. It focuses on a little-known and shameful episode in European history, and one which is important in looking at how modern Europe views itself. Rather than seeing it as one of the many cultures which have contributed to the ethnic, philosophical and cultural diversity of Europe, Islam is widely portrayed in the modern press as an alien and incompatible faith and culture, the presence of which within 'our' countries is a matter for deep concern. Carr emphasises that the bloody expulsion of the Moriscos was not a single, isolated occurrence, but has sinister resemblances to more modern genocides and ethnic
cleansing – the Holocaust, the Turkish genocide against Armenians, the Nakba, the bloody conflict surrounding the partition of India and Pakistan, and the fate of America's native peoples. The Morisco expulsions, he argues, were not simply the result of religious bigotry, but also have more modern resonances in the official language of security concerns about 'alien' populations who might have allegiances beyond the state in which they live which could result in treachery.

The book opens with a discussion of how “the tragedy of the Moriscos was part of a recurring dynamic that has been repeated in many other contexts, in which a powerful majority seeks to remake or define its own identity through the physical elimination or removal of supposedly incompatible minorities whose presence is imagined as potentially defiling or corrupting.” It closes with a disturbing reminder that, as well as parallels with twentieth century and earlier violence based on racial and religious hatred, the expulsion of the Moriscos also evokes the present Islamophobia which permeates so much current media and political posturing.

Carr is careful not to overdo the comparisons, but does highlight the disquiet which moves towards monocultures – bans on minaret-building, a concentration on 'Islamic fundamentalism' rather than the everyday reality of the majority of Europe's Muslim population – should raise in anybody. “The Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen has warned of the dangerous tendency to establish 'belligerent identities' based on supposedly antithetical civilisations and the potential for violence and demagoguery that such categories contain,” concludes Carr. “Four hundred years later, the destruction of the Moriscos is an example of what can happen when a society succumbs to its worst instincts and its worst fears in an attempt to cast out its imaginary devils.” This book is a must-read not only for those who want to understand the history of race and religion in Early Modern Europe, but also those who seek to challenge more modern racisms and prejudices.