



# **URBAN RELIGION**

**IN THE METROPOLIS TOKYO AND AT KYOTO**

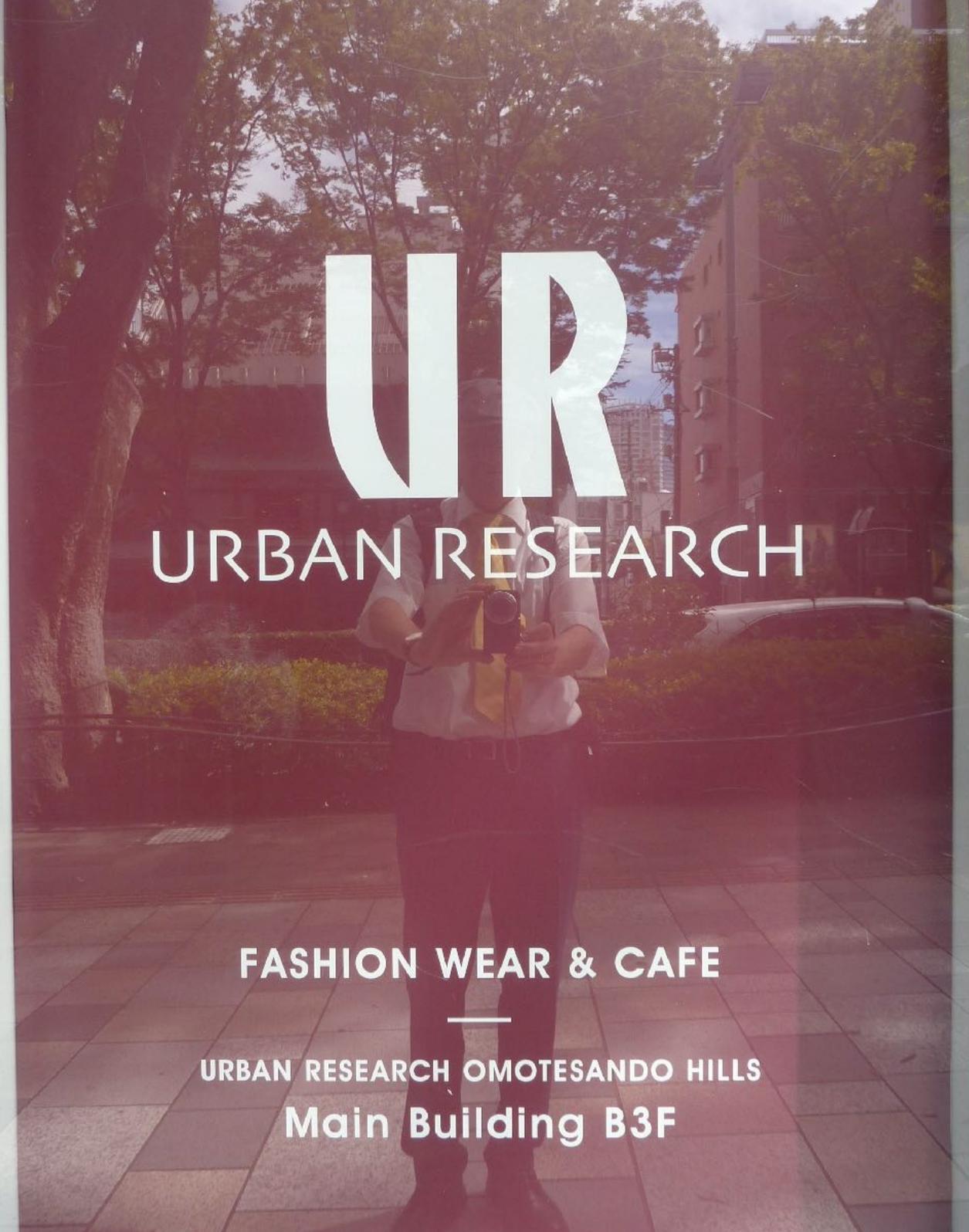
**JÖRG RÜPKE**



# URBAN RELIGION

## SURPRISING (IN-) SIGHTS

Invited to Japan and Kyoto in September 2019 I took the opportunity to collect impressions from a metropolitan present that adds to an understanding of how religion and urbanity have shaped each other for the last millennia. As all research, it is personal and evocative, not representative.



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URBAN RESEARCH

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If the Fujiyama is the sacred mountain of Japan, Tokyo is at its foot - if seen from the plane.



An unending agglomeration, a conurbation at the Bay of Tokyo, feeding on the country and the whole world.





# DIVERSITY

## IN ARCHITECTURE



# DIVERSITY

## AND IN PEOPLE





Religious practices, religious spaces, religious times are part of that. Right from the start of the settlement, the castle „Edo“ being founded in the 15th century, growing into a large city from the end of the 16th onwards and becoming capital of Japan and „Tokyo“ in 1686. Religion as visible today is no survival of these periods. In a metropolitan area of nearly forty million people, religion is visible in old and new architecture, in makeshift shrines and ephemeral festivals and processions. If some religious practices and actors strive for visibility in their neighbourhood or on grand scale, others remain invisible, because they do not care or even hide. The tourist's photos do not catch them at all. Naturally, the selection depends on one's own prejudices, the author's conceptions of what religion is and the author's intentions of what the academic construct of religion in the process of change called „urban religion“ should be like.

This view is informed by some basic knowledge of the history of religion in Japan, by European experiences and a view of urban religion in ancient Mediterranean cities. Ideas of a precarious order of religious pluralism, of the fluidity of polytheist systematization and of local knowledge and competition were seen through the lens of the camera and might be decoded from the photos. Yet, these are invisible orders, imputed onto as much as deducted from what is visible. All in all, the following pages are not a statement, but an invitation to embark onto „urban research“, to not only detect religion in the city, but to inquire about how religion got urban and how the urban was changed by religion. The wide distribution, the prominence and the acceptance of religion within the urban space of Tokyo and the central role given to religion in the construction of its „heritage“ by the administration of Kyoto tells of how much religion has shaped the cities' urbanities.

# SACRALISED SPACE

## BEHIND BARS?

If sacralization intends to make space different and to render its reference beyond the here safe and permanent, borders and marked thresholds are prominent means. This space is taken out of the grid of streets and houses just outside.



Sometimes the guardian gods  
need protection themselves.



Even if sacralized space is just  
around the corner, it is  
constructed as a space outside  
of everyday reach. Approach is  
slow and careful.







# FIREWALLS

The red color of the surrounding walls and gates is not by chance.



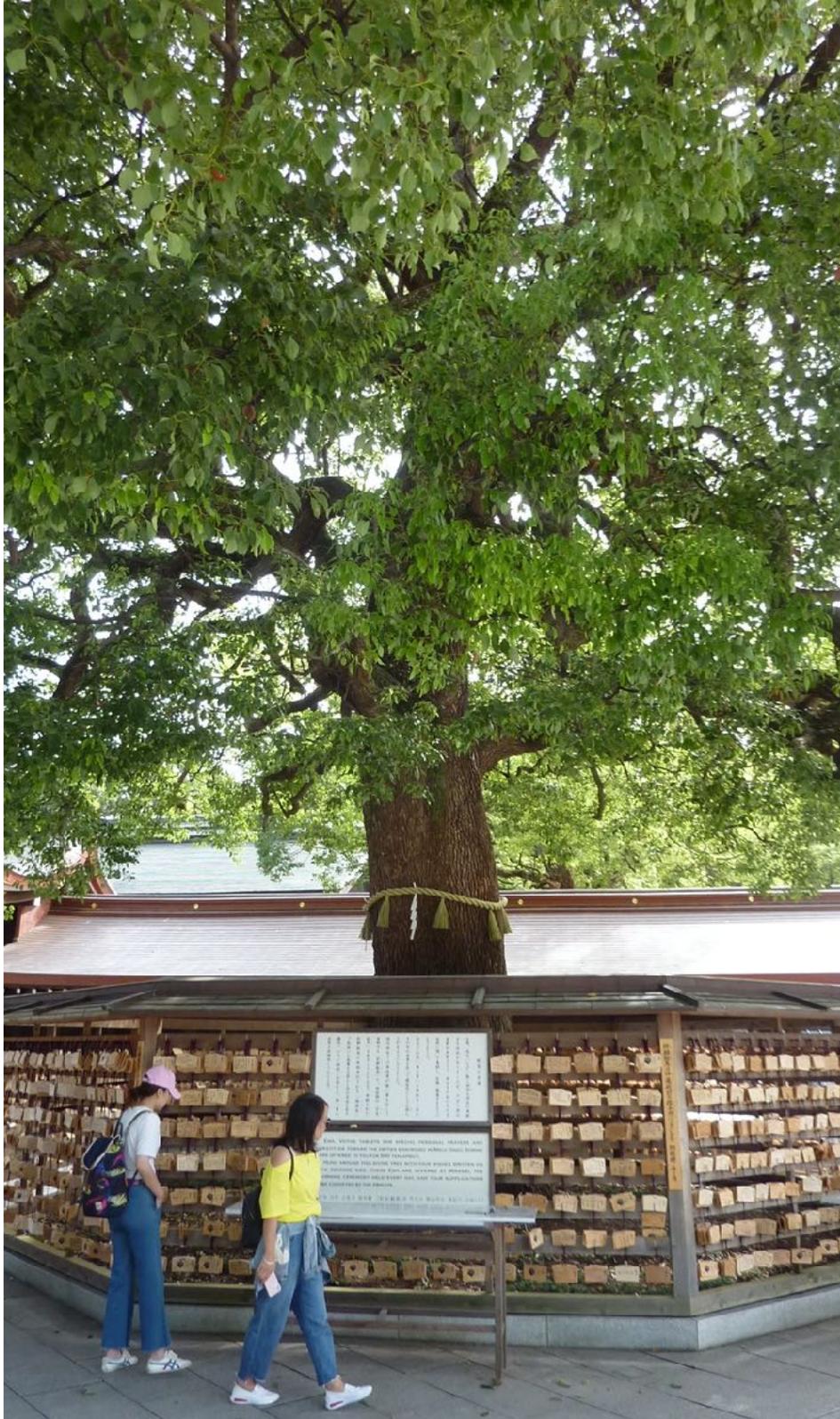
# BEHIND THE WALLS

## THE WORLD IS DIFFERENT

... but in very different manners. Spaces of experiences, stimulated by paths defined and informing the body, texts with open and hidden messages and a lot of green. In the middle or on the margins of the city.











# MINIATURIZING SACRALIZED SPACE

SCALING DOWN IS NOT  
REDUCING PIETY

Temple areas attract further temples, neighbourhoods need their own temples. Accommodating individual or small collectives' initiatives within the urban built environment entices reflexion about the essentials.





# NEIGHBOURHOOD RELIGION

In the end, the next temple is around the corner. Yet, it need not be yours. Optionalization of religion is an urban development, part and parcel of individualization and religious autonomy as much as of the commodification of religion. This holds true for practices as much as their instruments and objects.









# VOWS

## APPROACHING THE GODS IN WRITTEN FORM

Writing certainly is an urban art, at least from the beginning up to the very recent past. Urban gods can read and the prayer in its written form lasts beyond the ring of the bell and the clapping of the hands. Selling the locally successful form and transporting it by burning from time to time is a source of income of old.



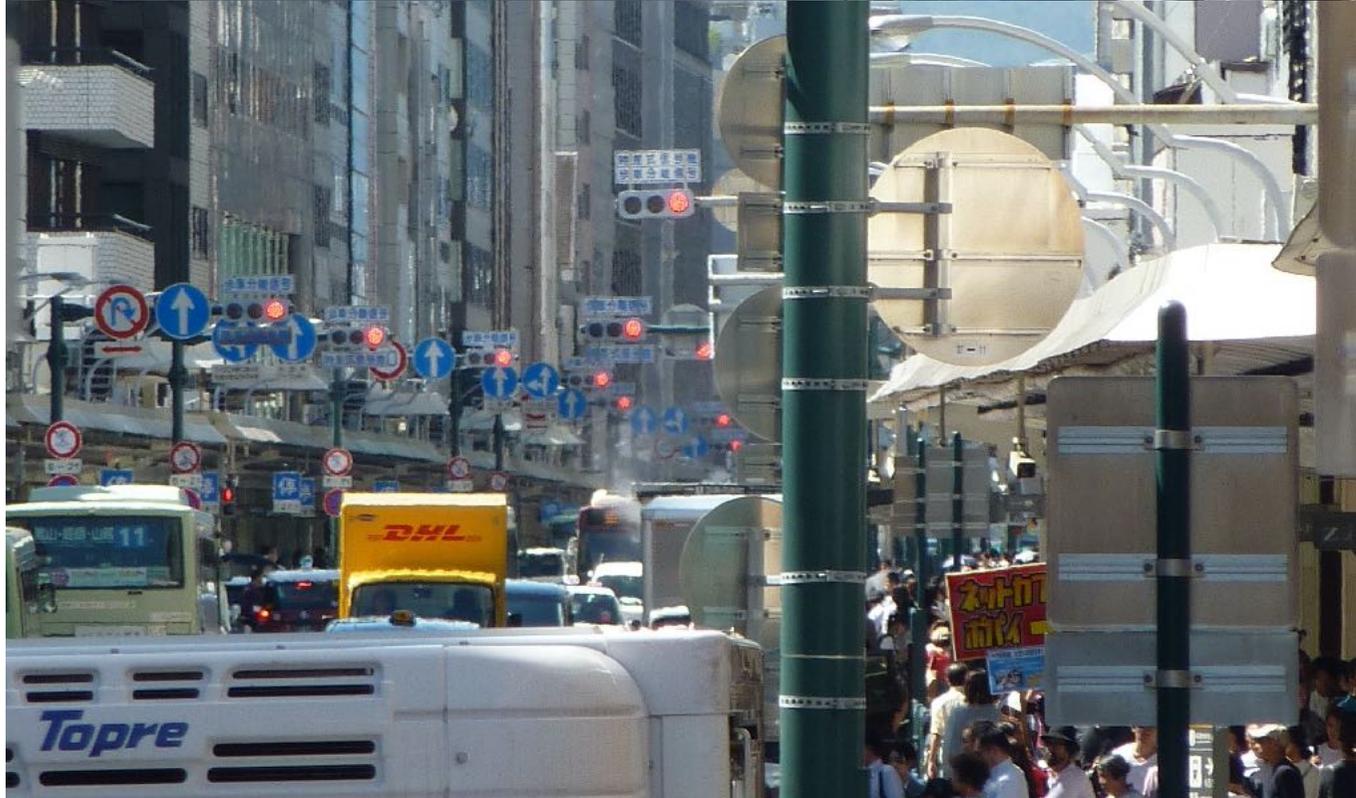




Stop or go? What shall be and what should be?



Cheap techniques of divination and the attempt to use the gods as a wish-fulfilling machine (seen and promoted as feeble and successful) are offered by temples fully adapted to the complexities of urban life.





In a boom town, religion need not be cheap. Urban gods have always more demanded than the first fruit of what happened to grow. Bordeaux and the best sake for instance.



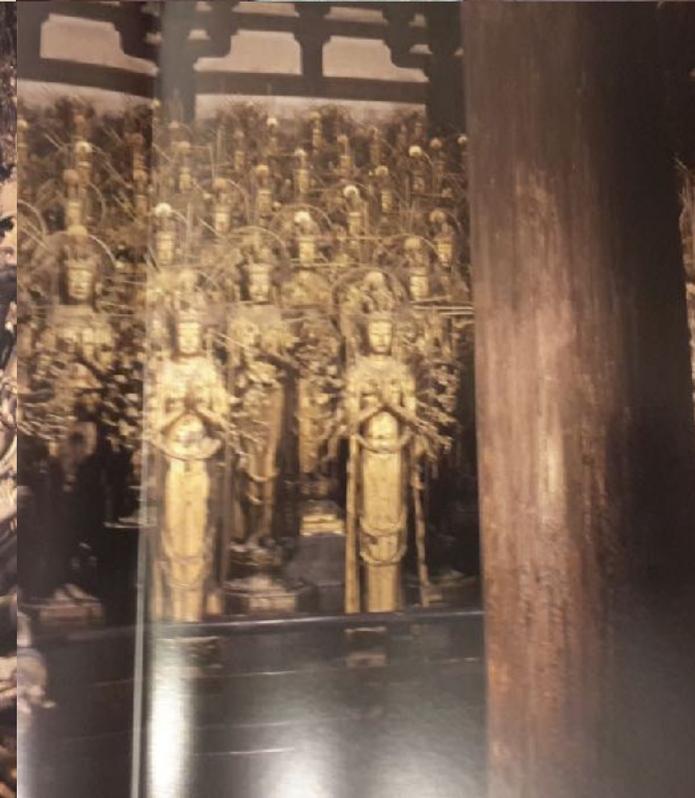
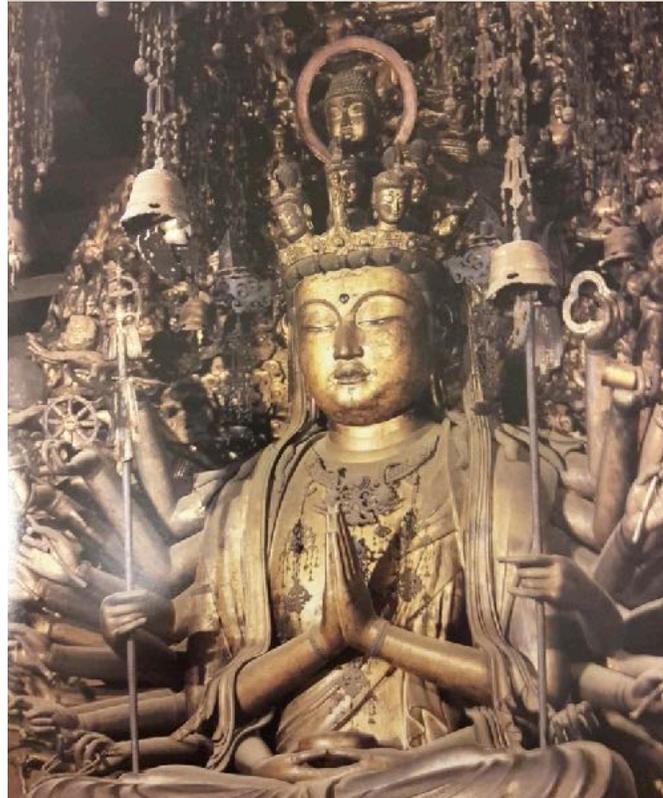
Or the largest hall imaginable.



# DIVINITIES

## ACCESSIBLE AND DIFFERENT

They are close and distant, have human faces and hide behind them. Seeing and feeding the gods is to be seen and to be fooled by one's addressees. This, at least, seems to be a common characteristic across the urban-rural divide. And yet, possibilities and the radicalness of reflexion become different.





# MONASTIC SILENCE

## WHY NOT IN TOWN?

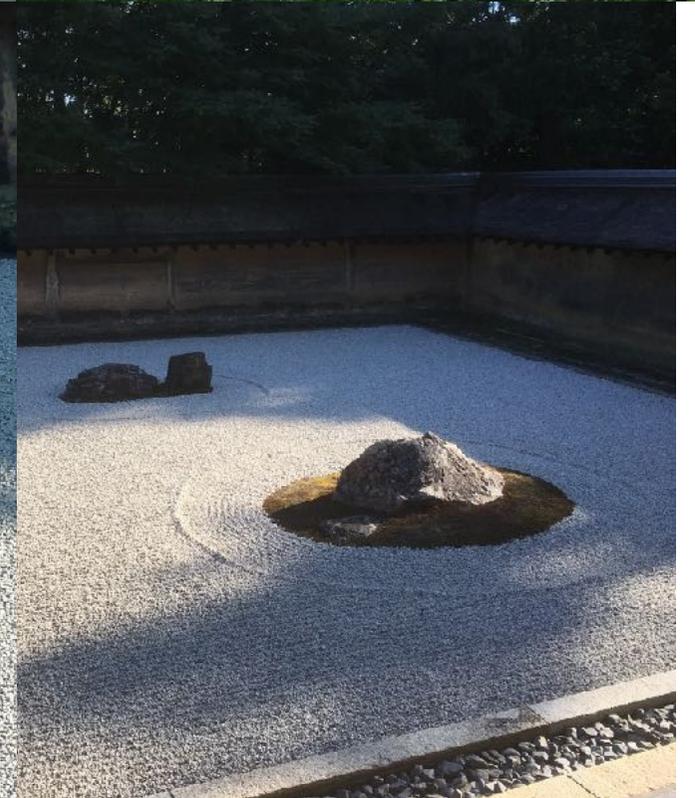
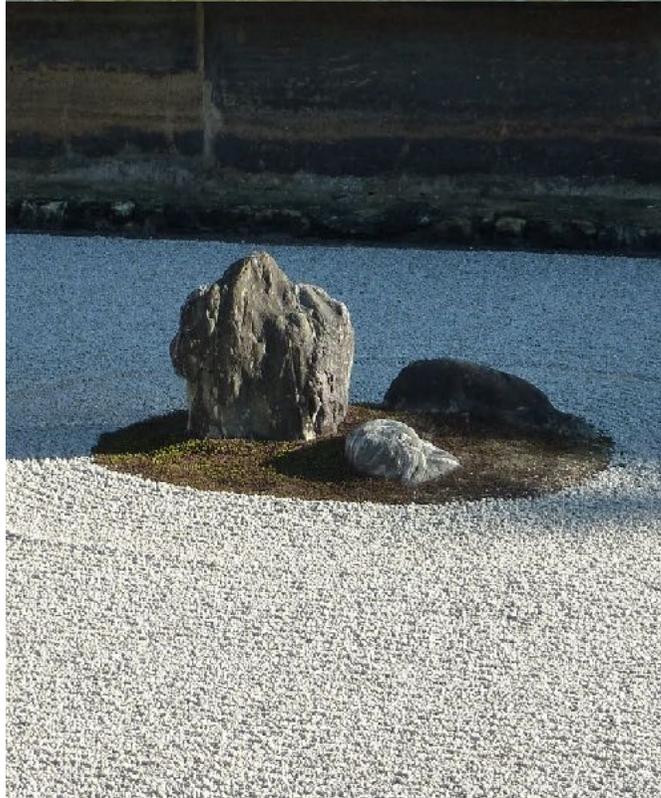
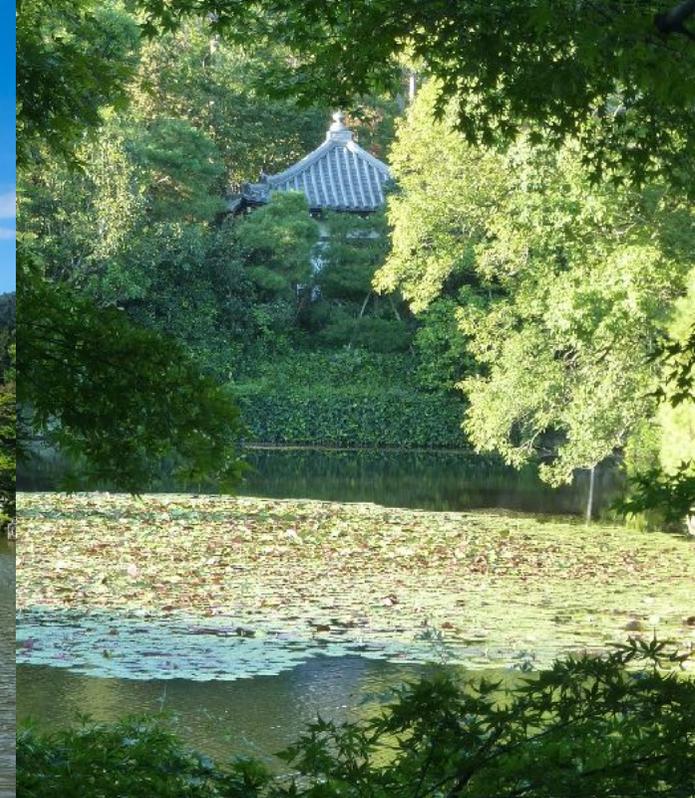
Mendicants offered services in medieval Indian and European towns. Buddhist temples offer silence and meditation, spiritual care and peace for the ancestors.







Or you build your retreat from the city already in your lifetime.



# APPROPRI- ATION

## WHY NOT IN TOWN?

In the end, however, urban religion is above all religion of the middle class, its women and men and children who can afford and are willing to invest their scarce time, space and money into that accessible, commodified, known, and ultimately strange form of communication.





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The images of the figures from the Sanjugendo-Temple are taken from the temple's brochure. All others are by Regina Rüpke or Jörg Rüpke

Erfurt, Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies of the University of Erfurt

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